

The image is a graphic design with a high-contrast, black-and-white or grayscale aesthetic. It features large, bold text in a serif font. The word 'RACE' is at the top, 'REVOLT' is in the middle, and 'ISSUE THREE' is at the bottom. The letters are white with black outlines, set against a background that appears to be a map of the United States. However, the map's boundaries are replaced by jagged, torn edges, giving it a fractured, revolutionized appearance. The word 'RACE' is partially cut off on the left. The word 'REVOLT' is partially cut off on the right. The word 'ISSUE THREE' is partially cut off on the bottom left. The overall effect is one of social and racial protest.

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INTRODUCTION —

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Welcome to 'the separatist issue', made up of contributions of people of colour only. The genesis of this idea was from talking to other folk of colour, together we were getting an overriding feeling of talking and talking with no-one seeming to listen.

And it's exhausting.

So is this issue is about valuing non-white voices, it is about listening to them and appreciating the work they do. It is about a critical mass. It is about seriously considering how oppression works in and from multiple locations. It is an attempt to move away from the intense feelings of isolation that stem from mostly being the only ones raising issues of race and racism within alternative communities.

And it is NOT about comfort.

When talking about this with a friend, they commented:

'Will be cool to read the next issue featuring only people of colour, but it's funny, I was thinking that no matter how "militant" the zine might end up being, white feminists and queers I reckon would totally allow space for it, because they'd think it was our dues or something - do you know what I mean? Like so many people are worried about addressing the issue of race when they aren't "of colour", that they tend to just nod their heads sagely and take any harsh words that might be thrown their way!'

I take their point, and strongly feel that if this issue creates nothing but sage head nodding it will have failed. Unpicking the privilege that the world is structured on cannot happen with a guilty nod. But maybe it can begin with a head-spinning meltdown followed by a painfully realised awareness of what it really means to be an ally.

For the people of colour reading this, this is for you, this is for the loneliness and for the rage, this is for a queer-feminist, diy politics that is critically aware. This is for building a place that is for us too. And for the belief that we deserve it.

November 2008

Race Revolt is a zine focusing on race, ethnicity and identity within queer, feminist and diy-punk communities.

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This mutual interview between two FTM/genderqueers of colour in London, UK, explores the parameters of multiply oppressed sexuality. From stereotypes about Asians to femmephobia and whiteness in trans scenes, we discuss the violence which frames our attempts to find sex, lovers, and words that make sense of it all. We describe how we are reclaiming sexual agency, both individually and collectively, through political and cultural work including performance that incorporates kink and race play.

J: We are two transpeople of colour, performers and organisers who have presented workshops together at queer, feminist and trans events, on exploring body image through photography, and on radical drag. We are also in a performance troupe with one other genderqueer person, who is a migrant from South Europe. How do we, as trans people of colour, negotiate sex and sexuality, and find partners that are sensitive to our experiences of oppression? What are the conditions for our communal work around sexual empowerment, and sex radical performance?

S: [...] I usually I find that race is something that people don't wanna talk about. It's something they feel uncomfortable about. They are not racist, so why should we talk about race. Y'know... It's something that we should have moved beyond? And these days, I often find I talk about race issues, just to test their reaction, to test the ground, to check their awareness.

Yeah, and it just seems so funny that we give so much in our workshops, our performances. It feels so hard to share like that when you are a trans person of colour, in a white dominated space, there seems to be so much on the line that you are risking. But I feel a lot safer doing that with you, another person of colour. But we have had experiences when people go away

from our workshop, and they still (laughing) 'she' us, or haven't understood our identities or our situations as people of colour in these communities. So you've left on a real high, when you come off stage, or after you've done the workshop. But then you always have this little doubt in your mind, 'Do people get it, or is someone gonna come up to me later and say something offensive?' Which just leaves you questioning whether the work you do is worthwhile? And it's really weird to be in that situation anyway, to be really high and then have an incident... like the one at [a trans event]. Or to be misread by someone, after you've just clearly stated who you are and what you're about. And to be on stage and give so much, you're opening yourself up so much to others, and to others' interpretations. And I think if it wasn't for you and Alex (our third boy-band member), being in the boy band and having that kind of safety within the group relationship that we have, and that you two are also giving so much, and are opening yourselves up so much, I don't think I would be able to do that on my own. I think when you go on stage, you kind of have that mental preparation, you don't give a shit, and you're just gonna go on and you're gonna nail it. But I wonder when you do it in a political context, or at a community event, it's not just about entertainment right? And I wonder if that's the right attitude to have? On the one hand, it's really liberating to just

PERFORMING LOVE, SEX AND RELATIONSHIPS, IN AND OUTSIDE OF A TRANNY BOY BAND

say 'I'm gonna go on stage, and I'm gonna take my clothes off, and I'm gonna do a sex scene on stage, and I'm gonna do it for me, to express and explore who I am, and I'm not gonna care how people react and interpret it.' And to do that with others who feel the same, to have that kind of relationship on stage. But on the other hand, if the workshop hadn't gone well, or I don't feel safe in a space, for example if it is white dominated or dominated by one type of people even, I think I wouldn't be able to go on stage and do that. [...] Because often I know the people I'm performing to. I think that's a lot to give, I think I could do it if it was an audience I have no connection to, but because these are people I know, I've met at the workshop and I'm gonna hang out in these communities, and I'm gonna continue to have a relationship with them so it makes it harder emotionally and is important they understand... even though at times it can make it also easier (when you feel the love in the room). [.]

J: Let's talk about Ladyfest Muelheim, where we performed our new piece for the first time. For the readers' information, Muelheim is in this urban, non-metropolitan area of Germany. The scene there is mostly white and non-trans, partly queer but also still quite influenced by separatist radical feminism. So we knew our piece would push some boundaries, as it's about claiming sexual agency in a context of multiple oppressions, and

assumptions about who gets to do what in bed and with whom,

Saying that, I'm not even sure if this is my interpretation of the piece, or if it's one that you and Alex share as well. And different audiences probably have different takes on it. Which is partly really cool, I like this idea of arts as a dialogue. I think all three of us liked the soundtrack, Queen's I want to break free, because of the sex positive messages and the encouragement to be all that you want to be. And that's a message that a lot of people can relate to, because there are so many rules to break around sex and gender. I also think that for you and me as trans people of colour, the fact that Freddie Mercury was South Asian and gay and died of the consequences of Aids, which was heavily sexualized at the time (and I remember this as I was 17), was important as well.

The setting of the act is a colonial one, and a domestic one. The Mistress of the house gets off with the butler behind the Master's back and ends up seducing and fucking the butler from behind and also from the front. The master catches them in the act and forces the butler to fuck the Mistress 'like a real man' (in missionary position). The Mistress and butler overwhelm the Master, the butler reveals that he is wearing women's lingerie underneath, and the two rejoice in their shared femininity and 'break free'.

[What was it like for you to take

on that role?]

S: It was very easy for me to take on my character, being the TV butler, being submissive, being a person of colour who's being oppressed, and then to be able to break free from that, was very empowering in the piece and something I could closely relate to.

J: Would you characterise what we did as race play?

S: Yes, definitely. [...]

J: How did you feel with me, because I played the white Mistress?

S: It's funny, because I don't think I even saw you as the white Mistress. This is because of something that X, our friend who is also a person of colour, said to me after our performance in Muelheim, that he was worried that it might have come across that you were the Asian bride of the Master, which added another dynamic. But also more so, I saw the femme connection more strongly than anything else because we are both femme, in the performance, and in real life.

J: I'm mixed race and middle class and I do sometimes pass as white, so that implicates me in that role, and it's not like it has nothing to do with me. And I have ancestors who were of the colonising 'race' and also ancestors who were members of the colonised serving 'race'. It's funny that as soon as I do

femininity I get read as a mail order bride. It's always been one of the trappings of femininity for me, one of the risks I take whenever I do femininity, especially if it's the excessive, extreme, over the top, self-consciously femme kind, the one that is not toned down or 'respectable', that I automatically become the Thai prostitute.

S: It could be relevant at this point to mention how you were read, firstly in Muelheim during the dress rehearsals, as something to be afraid of, and secondly in London at [a trans event], as being 'convincingly femme'.

J: (laughs) In Muelheim we rehearsed in the performance space, and there were a lot of people coming in and out, setting up the stage. When we were practicing our masculine presenting pieces, people would cross the room, with a mixture of curiosity, suspicion and attraction, but hidden behind a business-like manner. This changed dramatically when we rehearsed our femme piece, with me in my little mini skirt, heels, blond wig, and tight top with cleavage. Two people in a row opened the door, gasped, and almost slammed it shut again. I think it was firstly femme-phobia: this is a scene where most people aim for an androgynous presentation, and femininity equals un-enlightened, oppressed straight-girlhood. Add to that ideas about trans masculinity, which is also suspect but ok as long as it's safely contained on stage (where it's cute and not too threatening). Me

suddenly swapping my binder for a stuffed bra clearly exploded the gender confines of that scene. As trans people, we are expected to be ashamed and inhibited, less rather than more free of gender, certainly not irreverently pushing its boundaries in all directions.

[We discuss how one white performer had a problem with Jin's character bottoming, as s/he saw it as condoning violence against women.]

J: I find it interesting that she felt entitled to tell us how to deal with our sexualities. Because I think she was younger than us, and she came across like one of those gender studies students (which is ironic as I have taught gender studies, but am rarely read, racially and gender/age wise, as someone who could be on that side of the lecturing theatre). Her troupe is clearly influenced by Judith Butler. Like you said, their performances were actually framed by long speeches about how the presented moves 'deconstructed the gender binary'. Very much a one-to-one translation of *Gender Trouble*. Which I think is kind of old, and a bit sad. For an artist to have to interpret their own work to their audience. It's almost totalitarian, this idea that there is only one acceptable performance of gender and sexuality and only one possible way to interpret it.

It's one thing she didn't get what we're doing, since it is quite complicated and multi-layered. But it's something else for a white person to lecture and patronise

us, and try and take our sexual and racial agency away from us.

S [...]

... Yeah, I got the feeling from it that s/he was also very uncomfortable with our subject, the race play, the class play, I think specifically the race play. And that's probably something that does make people uncomfortable. But that's not a bad thing; it's again this whole idea of safe politics. And I also feel that s/he did feel superior to us, and I think this is sometimes linked with race. I know we often get mistaken as young brown trans boys even though we are in our 30's! I felt patronised.

J: [...]

And of course the femme, the Asian femme, is the ultimate victim, who isn't even involved in the dialogue, but needs to be saved by a white masculine-presenting person!

I have a problem with this brand of performativity, which is so normative in certain queer and trans contexts - which unfortunately are the ones that have the means to organise things and invite us, that form our audiences. Because they aren't really looking at power stuff beyond limited notions of sexism or heterosexism. So their notion of what's transgressive and what's oppressive is really narrow. If a white person doesn't get what you are doing, and how you are expressing your sexuality, you are not doing it right. They think they get to tell you what you should or shouldn't do with your

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body. [...]

[W]e have explicitly politicised this last performance, by designing a newspaper cover, and projecting it onto the stage. (This then becomes part of the choreography, as the Master misses the sexual affair as he is reading his newspaper.) The depicted photos and headlines deal with several historical developments around sexuality - the lifting of the ban on homosexuality in the British army in 2001, which coincided with the wars on Afghanistan and Iraq, the colonial scandal surrounding a relationship between a Memsahib and an Indian sweeper, Freddy Mercury's Aids-related death in 1991, the lifting of the anti-miscegenation ban in the US, the mainstreaming of radical feminism and its role in transphobia as well as the 'war on terror', stereotypes of Thai people as deceitful prostitutes and transvestites, and the 1987 arrest of sixteen gay men for consensual BDSM sex in 'Operation Spanner'. [...]

J: [I]t's interesting how very few people commented on the race aspect, even though it was right up there on screen. It is maybe not a coincidence that the only person who commented on it to me was another FtM of colour, and he totally got it. Other people would say things like 'Oh you looked gorgeous en femme, I had no idea you had that in you...' (S laughs). Maybe admired me, slightly guiltily, because they thought it might upset me to be desired that way. And of course I love hearing

such compliments, and it makes me feel affirmed as a multi-gendered person when people say 'You look good either way.' But I also felt strange that people are more comfortable commenting on my body than engaging in my politics. And it makes me wonder, is there a way we can prevent ourselves from being consumed so easily, exploited almost as these exotic decorations that add a bit of colour to majority white contexts? And how does that become more problematic when things actually go badly wrong in that space with regard to race?

[In the following, we discuss an incident that took place at an event where we both contributed in various forms and functions. For our personal safety, we have felt it necessary to anonymise the event.]

S: Yeah, that was a let-down for me... It was a disappointing end to such a great weekend. I was surprised by people I considered friends/ allies in their response to what happened. I guess at first I just felt that there was this conflict between our trans group, and the brown boys who were engaging in low level transphobic name-calling. And at first, sub-consciously, I felt really uncomfortable and awkward. And I didn't know where I belonged in it all, where my loyalties were, because I know what it's like to be read in that way, as a young brown boy, as being a trouble maker, as not being intelligent enough, or aware enough about issues. What made me uncomfortable was that I didn't really know... (breathes out) I

didn't really know whether to get involved or not, or how to get involved. Whether I'd be supported or listened to. I thought the name calling was unacceptable but I don't agree with how the whole situation was dealt with. I didn't like the police presence, which made me uncomfortable because of my history with the police, how I've seen police mistreat people of colour, especially young male people of colour. And I really felt I related really well to the women who were the partners of the boys - in the first incident of different older boys of colour shouting abuse at the trans people there, the women were telling the boys to stop and leave them alone and go home. Incidentally that's all it took and they did leave but the police were still called and actually wouldn't let the boys leave. This then created tension at the event and people began expecting more trouble and I felt even looking for it. I heard someone say 'those boys have come back' in a second incident when it was a different set of brown boys. This was blatantly racist and made me angry, so I just left the situation, had to leave the area and went inside. It seemed silly to sit on my own, when everybody was grouped together, in unity, over this situation. I was lucky enough that I was with another person of colour, when it finally dawned on me, what it was what was bothering me about it. I just said to them 'It sucks, that this involves people of colour.' I was worried what that meant in this situation, when this was their neighbourhood really. They were

supportive. They knew full well.

J: It was similar for me and my lover (who is also a genderqueer person of colour), because we happened to be sitting on the adjacent lawn. We heard raised voices and saw, on the one side, mostly white transpeople sitting on the lawn and, on the other, brown teenage boys walking by. Things escalated, a lot of it actually seemed to come from the white FTMs and butches, who engaged in this really patronising, macho kind of behaviour. One guy, I heard later, actually went up to the boys and poured beer over them (which is racialised since this is a Muslim area). My lover asked 'What do you think is going on?' and I said 'I don't know. I don't care. I don't wanna be part of this.' But of course we were and it was almost a question of: 'Do we even want to go back for the evening performance? Do we feel safe spending more time with these people, in this aggressively white community?' And you could see how they became a closer community as a result of the incident. And you and I have just looked at some of the Facebook pictures that were circulated, in an album called 'These people harass trans people'. At the bottom of the album, the photographer writes: 'But they are not that smart- as they couldn't manage to count- there were about 70 of us on the hill- so why would we be at all frightened of them?' So the event is remembered very much as a moment of celebration and bonding for 'our trans

community', as an empowering anecdote that brought 'us' closer.

But some of us don't feel that close any more and I know that you and I (and some of our queer and trans friends of colour) have felt quite depressed since the weekend. And it's ironic because we have given so much to this community with [lists: workshops, performance, exhibition, film programming], bringing people over from abroad, bringing in a lot of the brown faces and names, and essentially doing the diversity work. And I feel horrible because these people think they are so amazing and inclusive, that they don't have to worry about race because some brown people participated in their [event], and yet it all seems to be part and parcel of the process that made this space so violently white. [I'm also shocked because no-one told us] that the police had been involved, that they were 'protecting' [us] by essentially cordoning [us] off from the park, from this brown community that is already heavily policed every day, through stop and search and other criminalising measures. I am blaming myself now for not noticing this earlier and asking loud questions about the four or five cops standing around our area. And I wonder, did everyone know except for me, and why didn't anyone mention it to me? Am I this scary race person that is good enough to be the brown poster boy, but when shit actually starts happening we don't want him involved? The white people were obviously talking to each

other, and I think some of the brown people were, too, though much more quietly. Then again what would've happened if we had raised our voices? There would've been an uproar. The white people would've been very defensive and we would've been the baddies. Not only would we have felt excluded, we would have been excluded. It would have become physically very difficult for us to go back to these spaces.

S: I agree. Right now I'm caught up in whether to say something or not. At the time [...] it was happening so fast, I was thinking about that, too. When I did try and bring it up with someone I considered an (anti-racist) ally, they were defensive, and I knew I just wasn't gonna be heard. Since everybody had made up their mind in a group consensus, and decided how to look after the group.

J: Could you explain more?

S: I think by how the few macho people going over and making the situation worse for everyone, had also decided to act on behalf of everybody. They weren't questioned, or criticised then and there. It really didn't, for me seem like anything serious was actually going on. I mean seriously dangerous, but feel it was more hyped up, escalated even, in terms of responses to what was happening and so I think this incident could have been avoided.

I think when you have a group of

And it makes me wonder, is there a way we can prevent ourselves from being consumed so easily, exploited almost as these exotic decorations that add a bit of colour to majority white contexts?

It just seems like a false promise, or false kind of advertising, that things are inclusive. And I don't think people take a lot of time looking at what that really means, and all the issues that need to be considered.

people who've experienced abusive situations for being trans, people naturally feel very insecure and naturally want to protect themselves and it almost was like that's more about what it was about rather than what was actually happening then.

Everybody was getting whooped up to a situation that could have been defused very easily. These were silly kids after all.

[We discuss how one participant posted pictures of the young brown men on their facebook profile, which went out to everyone. Underneath the pictures was a statement 'These people harass transpeople.' We wonder if the person ever stopped to think how seeing this would make the people of colour at the event feel. The pictures received racist comments, which were then deleted. We discuss our disappointment that there didn't seem to be any anti-racist allies who spoke out against this, and against the way some of the white people at the event acted.]

S: Yet they want participation and to include people of colour.

J: It's hypocritical.

S: It's hypocritical and it's not safe, it's not safe for us. On the other hand I'm sure lots of people were totally oblivious or ignored what happened, or didn't speak up and that's part of the problem. [Now] I don't feel welcome in [certain queer] space[s] even though they aren't telling me I'm not welcome. I just don't know what else could

happen and what I should be prepared for. [Instead] I looked to the support of Blackfist (the queer of colour e-list we are part of), because I feel as one single voice, I guess I'm not prepared to put myself in that position, to criticise, as someone who is really actively involved in the community as well. I'm really glad that I could look to some people for support.

J: How do you see the importance of self-organized queer and trans of colour spaces against the backdrop of what happened?

S: I think it's really necessary. I think if we didn't have that space we all would have felt really bad about it and not talked about it. We all would have dropped out and not attended events (which inevitably has kinda happened anyway). It also provides us with a chance to confront people in those situations, and a safe way of doing that. Maybe more can come from being involved in this kind of space than trying to exist in a space that isn't really looking out for us. It's kind of like false, (laughs) I don't know, it's like... it just seems like a false promise, or false kind of advertising, that things are inclusive. And I don't think people take a lot of time looking at what that really means, and all the issues that need to be considered. People are probably not even aware of what that incident would bring up for people of colour, who were at the event and just ignored the racial connotations. And it does make me question about giving to that community because

sometimes I just feel imported (or ignored).

J: As in added on to make things look more interesting?

S: Hm. Hm. I would like to hang out in these spaces where my friends are. I think maybe me and you feel worse about it than some of the other people, because they are not so involved in the trans community. For us, or for me at least, that is a space, a community that is important for me to be involved in. I know I can't do that, with things being this way.

In a way it stops, or affects the kind of contribution that people of colour will offer to these events and spaces. I doubt people are going to invest so much in an event, when they see a situation like this happen. So I think it's something for people organizing them to think about, that is if they're really interested in inclusion!

J: I also think for us as transpeople of colour the stakes are higher and we have a lot more to lose. I find myself censoring what happened a lot, both to white transpeople and to non-trans queers of colour. [Some non-trans queers of colour ask me] 'How can you spend time in these racist spaces?' Which implies that we're sad victims with false consciousness, who dumbly continue going to people and places that abuse us. I get angry when people respond that way. I don't want to let them off the hook that easily, without interrogating their non-trans

privileges. Because they aren't doing anything to make queer of colour spaces safer for transpeople, or to work with us to create better spaces. And as long as that doesn't happen, I will need to go to both white trans spaces and non-trans queer of colour spaces, and take what I can to survive multiple oppressions, and assemble all the tools I can find for my own empowerment, and that of other trans people of colour. I really hope that one day we won't have to fight so hard and will be able to enjoy all those beautiful things that exploring gender and having sex should also mean.

S: Easily and so freely. (Laughs) Like I see others enjoying. Do you get what I mean? About being limited in my choices about who I want to fuck and spend time with, or who I can. Because that's the question, can I fuck this person or engage with that person? Is it ok to do that? I feel I have to be so careful and am constantly being let down or if not I still have to do so much work around race awareness...with any relationship really. It gets so tiring and I feel like I can't relax or let my guard down.

[We discuss the difficulty of finding partners in these problematic spaces who will be respectful and understanding.]

When I was younger, and by that I mean even three years ago, I didn't care. But I wasn't so race aware then and I had some pretty unhealthy relationships with mostly

white partners who didn't understand my experience as a person of colour. Now I'm really careful with whom I share my body and time with. I guess it seems I'm always getting misread, one way or another, as a trans femme brown boy. But at least people find me mysterious and interesting (laughs), which is quite funny. I often feel exoticised by the things partners have said to me about my 'soft olive skin' and 'unusual eyes' or offended by comments like 'big nose' and 'funny shaped eyes' because I look different to them. Also it's usually white people who want to know where I'm from, rather than who I am or what kinds of things I do. On the flip side if I start talking about my culture or race on my terms it's usually a conversation killer. I love your reply to 'Where are you from?' With saying 'Oh, I've been living in Finsbury Park (an area in North London) for the last few years.' (Laughs) Or something along the lines of that. Or saying 'Yes.' To wherever they say I'm from. And them saying 'Really?' Which is always funny. Sometimes I ask them to guess. And then change the subject, then I think 'Maybe it's better to just be in play clubs, sex clubs, where you don't have to make any conversation. Maybe it's safer to dress up in drag, and be whoever you want, from wherever you want.' Maybe that's part of what my trans identity is about. I wonder sometimes because it's so hard, just being myself. I'm always having to answer to someone or explain myself.

Being Trans is definitely a response to that.

J: Yeah. I was thinking the same earlier, can't remember which part in our conversation. And then felt guilty and didn't say it. (We laugh)

S: You should have said it anyway. We can always edit it out later. (Laughs)

Maybe internet sex is the way forward.

J: (Laughs) Why?

S: Cos no-one really knows... who's on the other side. Who's really there. It doesn't really matter does it? Plus you don't have to risk as much as in 'real life' since you don't invest that much.

J: Who would you be?

S: (Laughs) I'd probably be some high femme... slut.... Mistress probably, of some sort. Or a gay boy. Because it's so hard to access gay boy spaces, I find. A gay boy with a 'fully functioning cock'. (Laughs) Who would you be?

J: (Sighs) A vanilla femme bottom, a princess who gets carried around and fed and washed and who sips champagne all day long in the bubble bath.

S: Reminds me of Pretty Woman.

J: But I fantasize about a hairy bear doing these things to me. I'm not into Richard Gere. ... A brown bear, of course!

portrait of angela

Knows
You're born into uprising



cristy road

www.croadcore.org

IT'S (NOT) A WHITE WORLD:

MIMI NGUYEN

www.worsethanqueer.com

Originally printed in issue 28 of the now defunct, but one-time wonderful zine, *Punk Planet*.
www.punkplanet.com

Everyone knows it. Every once in a while, if I'm lucky, someone will say something definitive about it: *yes, it's true*. But then it just sits there, untouched.

I'm a girl who likes to lay it all on the table, so here it is: "whitestraightboy" hegemony organizes punk. And I'm not just talking about its dominant demographic.

Wait. I'll back up.

Race, in punk, is like outer space: this distant constellation of "issues" clustered way, way out there. This isn't to say, for instance, that punks haven't produced some shrewd analyses of US foreign policy (a perennial punk favorite), effectively organized huge protests against apartheid or the Persian Gulf War. In fact, punks seem to be pretty good with political economy; I first learned about the World Bank/IMF from the zine *Assault (With Intent to Free)*, ferchrissakes.

But somehow the p-rock backyard got disconnected from the world on the other side of the fence and what happens "out there" is rarely reflected "in here." So when Kathleen Hanna

screamed, "SUCK MY LEFT! ONE!" and nailed the Punk Rock to the wall, and when the core soon after went queer, I jumped for joy because it was about time.

But still I'm waiting for my race riot.

Take the way in which travel gets talked about in punk. It reveals all kinds of assumptions we make about privilege and social mobility. Travel is almost always about leisure, self-discovery, "freedom," and rarely ever about immigration, refugee movement, or exile. It's never about how some people —white, heterosexual, middle-class, male— often travel in more comfort than others —nonwhite, queer, poor, female). Don't mistake me, I'm not suggesting we chuck that new *Cometbus* (punk zine based in California, HS) out the window. My point is this: we need to examine our categories, *the words we use and how we use those words*, for the exclusions we make when we oh-so casually invoke them.

This essay tells several stories. The first admits to a motive. That is, it begins with my cynicism, my disappointment and my anger. The second story is half-formed: it's the story of writing a critical analysis of a set of communities —grouped under the umbrella of "punk"— with which I have a sordid past, an ambivalent present and a mutual love-hate relationship. The third and most obvious story is about those communities and what gets circulated under the sign of "race" there.

Unfortunately, this is also the most complex story.

So let's map out some of the ways the punk scene deals with race and break down some of the assumptions and problems involved with these particular approaches. I'll just give a general overview—there's a lot more ground to cover. So rather than present a laundry list of specific examples of racist statements or misdeeds, overt or otherwise, produced under the name Punk Rock, it might be more useful to try to understand the "why" and "how" — the politics and attitudes that *make room* for those acts and misdeeds.

And remember: I critique because I care.

i got your theory right here, whiteboy.

I'm going to say something blasphemous: there's something really "American" structuring the rhetoric of punk rock citizenship. When social critic Joan Copjec wrote, "If *all* our citizens can be said to be Americans, this is not because we share any characteristics, but rather because we have all been given the right to *shed* these characteristics," she could've just as easily been talking about punk. Somehow punk is a quality that's understood as transcending race, gender, sexuality, or whatever.

To get our official membership card, we're supposed to give up our put certain parts of ourselves aside — or at least assign them

LOOKING FOR RACE IN PUNK

to a secondary rung. Differences are seen as potentially divisive. Some -like race or gender- are seen as more divisive than others. The assumption is that somehow “we” —because punk is *so* progressive, blah blah— have “gotten over” these things. But when something earth-shattering like riot grrrl ruptures the smooth surface of p-rock, punks scramble to “unify” again. Appeals are made to a “common culture” - whether as “Americans” or punks (dude) - in order to flatten, soothe, or (if those don’t work) bang out those erupting differences.

Of course, this “common culture” is not really that common at all. Whiteness falls into a “neutral” category, and race is a property that somehow belongs only to “others.” (How many times have you heard, “Yeah, this girl said” with the assumption that she’s white taken for granted?) So this abstract, conformist citizenship offered by punk to someone like me is a one-handed affair - it all depends on how I want to narrate my raced, sexed, and gendered body into these supposedly democratic communities. If I keep my mouth shut and don’t “make an issue” of it, I’m told that I’ll get along fine— and never mind the psychic erasures I might have to endure.

That’s the paradox: some kinds of “individuality” are valued according to punk’s “common culture” while others, well, aren’t. This is what I mean when I say “whitestraightboy” hegemony organizes punk, and this is why I make a point of my

“Asianqueergirltomboy” specificity.

So while race *everywhere else but punk* is understood as institutional, structural, within the scene it gets talked about in terms of often isolated, individual attitudes. So racism in the scene is then commonly understood as something that irrational extremists (you know, good ol’ boys in white sheets or marching around with shaved heads) and maybe the Big Bad State do, while “ordinary” people occasionally indulge in individual acts or attitudes of “prejudice.” Racist, sexist or homophobic individuals are usually denounced as detractors from “real” punk principles, as if punk were *inherently* anti-racist, -sexist, or -homophobic. But both blunt-object and garden-variety racisms are only part of race as it’s understood as a *system of classification*, one that overdetermines all our institutions and intersects with other social categories (gender, class, sexuality) and capital.

Simply put, racial hegemony is big, scary, and messy.

This is not me pointing fingers and saying, “You’re a racist! And so is he! And her, too!” When I say “whitestraightboy,” I want to invoke how the category is socially constructed with all kinds of privileges attached. I don’t mean to indict everybody who “fits” - why, I have a number of friends who are white boys! (*She said, batting her lashes in innocence.*) This *is* me, however, confronting a widespread phenomena in punk called

Dodging Accountability for My Privilege(s). That is, I want to insert the idea of “power” into the conversation.

And power isn’t always obvious. We can point to the State and say, “Now, that’s power, sonny!” But where, or *how*, do we locate oppressive ideologies? This is where power gets slippery because it seeps into everything — even in our language.

That is, we have to look at race not as something as simple as “color” discrimination, but as a system or structure of power that’s deployed -in any number of ways- within any given historical moment. (I’m going to say the word “power” again and again, so get used to it.)

That said, how exactly *does* race get talked about in punk?

the “dude, punk is equal opportunity!” syndrome

Reading MaximumRocknRoll (*California-based punk zine, HS*) is like dredging sewers for corpses; the stink is something awful. MRR tends to epitomize the “angry white male” knee-jerk response so popular to the national neurosis, only with spikes and three chords. Trading on crude stereotypes and slurs, the typical MRR fan (or columnist, for that matter) will usually assume he (because it’s usually a white, hetero “he,” but often enough a white, hetero “she”) is pushing the envelope — “ohhh, I just called that guy a fag, tee hee!” — and then wave

his little fist in the air, triumphantly taking recourse to the First Amendment and the Constitution to defend his speech acts. Alternative, my ass. This is known as “equal-opportunity offensiveness” — although if you dare say anything about white straight men and their pencil pricks, you’re just being plain mean. Poor babies.

But it’s not particular to MRR (which may or may not evolve under new editorship). Punk luminaries from any number of other venues, whether Fucktooth or AK Press, have learned their lessons well at the knee of free-market (hi, capitalist) ideology: punk is an open emporium of ideas and you, the supposedly savvy shopper, is “free” to pick and choose. It’s a perspective that assumes each individual is happily “rational,” “objective,” and handily armed with “common sense.” Yeah right. You don’t go to the mall with no clothes on and everyone shops the open marketplace of ideas with certain social logics intact. What gets called “rational,” “objective” or “common sense” is always, *always* shaped by the ideological baggage someone brings with them (i.e., it’s “common sense” that men fuck women and women give birth to babies, and it’s “non-sense” that men fuck men, women fuck women, and babies come from test tubes).

I make this point to reiterate how problematic punk’s “rugged individualism” is for any expression of politics because of the ways in which it ducks the question of power. Artist Jenny Holzer wrote, “The idea of transcendence obscures oppression,” and punk is not an

exception. From punk’s hyper-individualism it’s a slippery slope to the kinds of neo-conservative political arguments suggesting, among other things, that affirmative action is “unfair” (like structural inequalities aren’t) and why don’t more of “those people” (welfare recipients, immigrants, whatever) just pull on those boot-straps? You know you’ve read those kinds of opinions in the pages of many a fanzine.

Talk about American mythologies. It’s the punk version of Manifest Destiny and the Lone Ranger, re-imagining the Wild West for disaffected and mostly white youth. It’s a privilege to believe that you can extract yourself from the context of social relations and imagine yourself the sole shaper of your fate. It’s the kind of attitude that puts big obstacles in the way of asking the critical questions about *why* punk is largely white, heterosexual, and male, and *why* punk’s politics look the way they do.

invisibility rules (not), okay?

The most famous liberal response to the question of race is compounded by the shrug — the color-blind approach that would have us believe “we’re all just human” or, in this case, “we’re all just punk.” Color-blindness suggests that race is *only* skin-deep; that beneath race is something more fundamental. It’s a typically power-evasive move, one that pretends that individuals don’t operate within the context of uneven social relations.

The call to transcend differences obscures the material and psychic effects of living in a maligned body — of racial, sexual, or national not-belonging.

And of course, it’s always those of us who are “other” -non-white, non-Western, non-hetero, non-male- who are called upon to “transcend” these to become generically “just human,” to enter a neutral state which presumably white straight men have got down pat *without even trying*.

Even on the most surface level, the process of making sure everybody is “just human” glosses over histories of people of color in punk because, so the story goes, *it doesn’t matter what “color” they are*. But of course it *does* matter - the reasons why I got involved with punk have everything to do with my refugee-queer background, the way I came to understand myself as “alien” in a white working-class neighborhood in central Minnesota. And it might be hugely significant for kids who are otherwise wondering what the hell this white Punk Rock has to do with them, anyway.

But worse, this insistence that “we’re all the same” leads to all kinds of equivalences that just make no sense at all. That is, “blue hair” discrimination *does not* even come close to rivaling racism. And if one more punk asks me to explain the difference between calling someone a “whiteboy” and calling someone a “nigger” or “chink,” blood is seriously gonna flow. It’s called history, people.

As Minor Threat’s “Guilty of Being White,” Black Flag’s “White Minority,” the Avenger’s

I'm still waiting for my race riot

"White Nigger," or even Heavens to Betsy's "White Girl," aptly demonstrate, not all states of alienation are alike or "equal." That is, *mine does not match up neatly with yours.*

where's the riot, white grrrl?

and yeah some of you say we are "out to kill white boy mentality" but have you examined your own mentality? Your white upper-middle class girl mentality? what would you say if i said that i wanted to kill that mentality too? would you say: "what about sisterhood?!"

—Lauren Martin, You Might As Well Live 4 (Spring 1997)

When it first delivered a good, swift kick to the masculinist punk paradigm where it counted most, riot grrrl marked the not-so-generic-after-all "whitestraightpunkboy." That is, riot grrrl confronted the popular illusion of the "abstract (punk) citizen" and forced punk to examine its given categories of ex-/inclusion. And while previous—and, I think, less radical—manifestations of feminist politics in punk went the way of grim assertions of equality, *riot grrrl made you look.* That is, riot grrrl practiced an unabashedly *embodied* polemic, exercising an oppositional body politic that ruptured the foundation myth of punk egalitarianism.

Now, I truly believe that riot

grrrl was—and is—the best thing that ever happened to punk. Please, quote me on that. Riot grrrl critically interrogated how power, and specifically sexism, organized punk. Unfortunately, riot grrrl often reproduced structures of racism, classism, and (less so) heterosexism in privileging a generalized "we" that primarily described the condition of mostly white, mostly middle-class women and girls. For students of feminist history, the so-called second wave—also white-dominated—stumbled over the same short-sighted desire to universalize what weren't very universal definitions of "woman," "the female condition," and "women's needs."

Again, all differences are not created equal. In the hey-day of the second wave, Euro-American feminists caught a lot of flak for comparing (white, middle-class) housework to (black) slavery and riot grrrls are hardly innocent—I've read work by white grrrls abusing the loaded symbolism of black skin to describe the condition of fat discrimination. Hierarchizing oppressions isn't the point, but historicizing oppressions and accounting for material inequalities *is.*

"a friend of color equals better living!"

Once race finally came up in conversation, a deluge of white punk/grrrl confessions flooded the arena. Suddenly everyone was

"working" on his or her privileges. Because I'm a demanding girl I'm not impressed—the ways in which "accountability" gets defined and expressed are really problematic. So when p-rock individualism meets riot grrrl's insistence that we take it in the backyard, sometimes not-so-revolutionary things happen. The result is often self-referential, guilt-stricken confessions, broken record-style. (Evil Mimi pipes up, "I blame emo!") I read in one white girl's zine, "i work on the racist thoughts and actions that are just totally subconscious, but i still feel weird about everything i don't have any friends who are of color. *i don't know how to react to people of color.*" Um, what? Just who was this written for, anyway?

From another emo-zine: "i'm working on my sexism, classism, racism my revolution deals with me. these are things i am doing to make myself feel better."

And another: "[She] told me that if I wanted to understand and work on my racism, classism, sexism that I need to actively pursue intimate relationships with less privileged people and prove that I can be a real ally to them."

Revolution narrowly defined as individual self-improvement ("I'm doing this for me!") isn't much of a revolution. Again, it's a national phenomena: social change shrinks to fit. It's a popular "band-aid" liberal response to structural inequalities, something akin to

“love sees no color” or “I have black friends.” I’ve even read zines that define racism as a “lack of love,” easily remedied once “we all recognize each other as family.” (This is me, puking.)

The original feminist maxim “the personal is political” registered a transformative logic. Certain personal experiences, like rape, were reinterpreted as social phenomena with histories and political consequences. This was — and *is* — still a revolutionary concept that grounds politics in our everyday lives. But when *all* politics become only personal, they become removed from both history and immediate social realities so that “race” is acknowledged only as this frozen thing “we” (a conditional, white-ish “we”) have to be “more sensitive” to. Meanwhile, social change on any other level is put off and rarely addressed. God knows I’m the first girl to utter all kinds of blasphemies about the ways in which we organize or “do” activism, but getting down to brass tacks, I still think social justice is, you know, *important*.

Moreover, the whole “pursuing friendships with the less privileged” has a real creepy paternalistic vibe. Like other liberal approaches to race, it not only commodifies the “racial other” (“How many friends of color can you collect?”) but again denies individual deep complicity with the systematic structures of race and racism. What’s uniquely annoying here is the whole “it’ll make me a better person/I’m working on my racism” confessional spin — it’s ultimately self-serving, self-referential, and, really, arrogant. As a friend of mine put it, “It makes

befriending folks of color sound like a pottery class: *personally enriching*.”

in/appropriate behavior

Uh huh I see / Mm-hmm oh I see / You So aware / but my I.D. is your novelty

—Sta-prest, “Let’s Be Friendly With Our Friends,” Let’s Be Friendly ep

Appropriation is easy — it supposedly lets “us” off all kinds of hooks, as if the desire to be near, speak for, or even *be* the Other, was in itself an antiracist strategy. A few years ago in a zine called *Wrecking Ball*, two girls conducted an interview with one another that neatly “ate the Other,” to paraphrase black feminist bell hooks, taking the notion of “colonizing blackness” to new levels. Citing a “possible Ethiopian ancestor,” a white girl shared with the reading public her decision to “claim” blackness. This was framed as a big antiracist breakthrough. She then went on to speak about an “us” that was defined as “African people all over the world,” ignoring the *enormous* material privileges of being nationally and racially Euro-American. Romanticizing blackness and black oppression, she of course doesn’t have to actually *live* in a black body. And the emphasis here on a depoliticized “love” (she insists “we are family”) performs a kind of amnesia — disguised as something utopian — by abandoning an analysis or engagement with structural inequalities for a privatized, individualized solution.

The Make-Up (*gospel/punk band from Washington DC, HS*) —with

their white-ish gospel thing kinda bother me. Not that I have anything invested in authenticity. I don’t believe that “culture” is or should be understood as static or unchanging, but call me cynical, I’m suspicious of Western avant-garde (including punk) claims to transgress bourgeois banality channeled through acts of cultural confiscation. So can the Make-Up exist without referencing Elvis’ gift to rock ‘n’ roll — making black music safe for white folk? This isn’t a judgment call as much as it’s a demand to critically examine the dynamics of any so-called exchange.

there’s always room for leftovers.

Other ways to not account for (racial) privilege, or, at least, do it badly? Out-and-out condescension is an option; there’s always talk in punk of “making room” for the voices of people of color, talk that never quite examines the power relations involved, i.e., who’s making the room anyway?

And we can’t forget the “my great-grandmother was an Irish immigrant” narrative that romanticizes the past in order to evade complicity and privilege in the now.

Or the “voice of the voiceless” syndrome: rich white kids talking about people of color or Third World revolutions while avoiding their own complicity in systems of domination. That is, avoiding —for one thing— the power implicit in presuming to become the “voice” for a population assumed to be otherwise “voiceless.”

And there is, of course, the increasingly popular “race traitor” card — anarchists really like this one. Called the “new abolitionism,” the formula is pretty straightforward. If enough individual whites voluntarily *decide* not to be white, creating some sort of critical mass of “ex-white” people, racial inequality will be toppled by their collective sacrifice and we can all rejoice. Saved by the white, oops! I mean, “ex-white” people.

this was in the original version, and i liked what he said so much i'm inserting it here: Of course, we have Howard Winant to put a damper on proceedings: “[The new abolitionists] fail to consider the complexities and rootedness of racial formation. Is the social construction of whiteness so flimsy that it can be repudiated by a mere act of political will, or even by widespread and repeated acts at rejecting white privilege?”

Do I need to say it again? You know the drill, but here’s the buzzwords: “rugged individualism,” accountability, uneven power relations. *Go*

“what the hell now?” — coalition politics for a punk age

There are lots of zines that do good —often amazing— work on cultural politics and the social and psychic relations of race: Keyan Meymand’s *Kreme Koolers*, Bianca Ortiz’s *Mamasita*, Kristy Chan’s *Tennis & Violins*, Rita Fatila’s *Pure Tuna Fish*, Lauren Martin’s *You Might As*

Well Live, Chop Suey Spex, The Bakery, just to name a few. And again, there are always those writers and activists who are doing a lot of important work around institutional racisms—interrogating the nitty-gritty structural issues and ideological underpinnings of urban underdevelopment, environmental racism/toxic dumping, the prison-industrial complex, welfare reform, affirmation action, and yes, U.S. foreign policy. And they can and *do* write responsibly, accounting for their social location, aware of how that might position them in relation to the subjects about which they’re writing.

Punk doesn’t exist in a vacuum. Even on the most superficial level, recruitment, while fun, isn’t a solution. Diversification of our membership rolls is way different than effecting critical transformations at the analytic level —and in any case hardly addresses the people of color who are in or around punk *now*. (And yes, we’re here, thanks. Banging our heads against the wall, maybe, but we’re here.) What needs to happen —on a punk-scale and a large-scale sort of way—is a revolution in the ways in which we frame ourselves within social, psychic and political relations. If you can read Noam Chomsky, you can also read Chandra Mohanty, Andrew Ross, or Lauren Berlant. If you don’t know who they are, *find out*.

What all this *doesn’t* mean is, “I can’t talk about anything because I’m a white, straight male.” That’s too easy — too often an excuse not to do your homework. I don’t believe that the specific plot-points of your

social location have to determine your conscious political agenda (i.e., there’s no one-to-one correspondence between the two) and I’m way over the “more oppressed than thou” calculus. I’d like to think my praxis is more complicated than that. And no, I’m not “just like” you but hey, coalitions are risky —and hopefully productive— that way.

So if you’re white, own your whiteness. Don’t assume whiteness describes the world. (And yes, I realize that people live their whiteness differently according to how it intersects with gender, class, sexuality, et cetera, within their personal context.) Don’t assume whiteness describes the world. Challenge others when they do. My friend Iraya —Aloofah of the sadly defunct multiracial multisubcultural queer pop ensemble Sta-Prest— calls it “doing the white on white.”

You (and I mean everybody now) *can* be accountable to your social location. Interrogate and historicize your place in society, punk, whatever, and be aware of *how* you talk about race, gender, sexuality — it’s political. Examine all the categories you’re using at least *twice* for hidden assumptions, exclusions, erasures. Recognize power in all its forms, how it operates. Engage it, even use it strategically. And work *with* me, not for me.

Actively creating a public culture of dissent —punk or not— will have to involve some self-reflexive unpacking of privileges/poverties and their historical and political contexts.

Here’s my bid, where’s yours?

THINGS I'D STILL LIKE TO KNOW...

yasmine brien
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It's relatively easy in alternative circles to think we've got it cracked. "We" the anarchists, the queers, the diy scene, the feminists, the underground – oft derided, scorned, actively unwelcomed by the mainstream sometimes try to forget that we too struggle with racism, homophobia, sexism, islamophobia, -ism, -phobia, -ism....

Prejudice and discriminatory behaviour are two different things, and as a working-class queer of colour I try to remind myself regularly that I too have been indoctrinated within this society and therefore must accept that now and again I encounter a previously unknown blind spot of prejudice – and I deal. It's a habit I'd strongly recommend, an exercise in reality and a constant personal journey into being the community I want to help to create.

Challenging myself on my prejudices, my behaviours, my actions is a fairly straightforward activity. I've known myself long enough to trust I won't get too defensive, nor end the relationship with me. It's unlikely that

I'll hold a grudge at being called out on areas of my life and politics that I could improve on, and it shouldn't create any ripples within my social circle.
Phew.

Sadly though it's apparent that my relationship with challenging individuals, groups, scenes is at times a much more terrifying and depressing affair. Even sadder is that it's a role largely left up to me.

I want a world in which all people feel as personally affronted, angry, frustrated as me - because it IS personal to them, and not just cos they have a friend or a lover or a neighbour who is a person of colour, a queer of colour.

Maybe because those around me just don't see the same stuff I do, maybe because they don't have the language for it, maybe because it's obviously "my" battle and not "theirs" - I tend to still think that it is "ours".

As it's much more difficult to establish regional and physical alternative people of colour communities in this country, unlike in the US, so I've been doing a lot of community building on-line. One particular group, blackfist, has opened up new channels of communication for me with other queers of colour. It's also served to open up numerous questions, many new indeed, but many more I'd set aside unanswered and frustrated with some time ago.

Questions related to how we recognise and transform the occasional egotism in alternative communities that it's those outside of them who need to sort out their attitudes and ignorance. Questioning how we truly create alternative realities without tokenism, exoticism, ignorance, stereotype and occasional downright offensiveness and rudeness. Questions on communication and how we find ways of ranting when we need to, but also having ways of positively critiquing our communities without defensive posturing. Questions of solidarity, and what it really means for and to people of colour in mostly white activist, diy, alternative scenes.

Daunting as it may seem I truly believe that we, in the widest possible definition of the word, can find answers to these questions so long as we're not afraid to pose them and maybe get a little bumped and bruised along the way. In order to do this there's some things I'd still like to know, to invite us all to explore.

I'd like to know more about the ways in which some people of colour have felt isolated and frustrated by recent womens/queer spaces and events. Having spent almost 10 years in the "mostly if not quite all" white Norwich, and still largely hanging with a white crowd here in Bristol, I'm not always sure how tuned in my

responses are to events or conversations in which I have been tokenised or underestimated as a women of mixed parentage, or in which I have encountered problematic discourses relating to race and ethnicity.

That said, I do know that this could be as a result of having pacified myself due to having had so many of these experiences, maybe my coping mechanisms are just so good these days that I no longer feel so angry. Having sadly become so used to it over the years there are times that I just can't manage to engage with it all on an emotional level, and therefore I don't always seek to challenge what I see and hear. I hope that makes sense. I live each day with rage, but at the same time on a personal day-to-day level feel that I probably let a million and one things pass regularly - but certainly not all, I just have to focus my battles cos I can't fight them all alone.....

For me, and many others, it's not all about my ethnic origin as I also find myself dealing with the equally at times "invisible" shit associated with being a working class queer woman in a largely privileged and often mostly male middle class anarchist community - I, as many do, have to share my strength across far too many fronts.

I'm interested in reconnecting with and calling for some debates about how these issues relate to our community building, the places that we live, the people with whom we create our family. To share ideas of how we can challenge covert and overt racism in such a way that we do not compromise ourselves, nor put our much needed community and friendships in jeopardy (except where it's due), cos you gotta take solidarity where you can find it some times - or at least I do. It's time to open our ears, yes you included, to what it really means for some of us as individuals and more widely as people of colour to have experiences within so-called friendship groups and communities that leave us feeling distressed and drained.

But this needs to be so much more than just an opportunity for some of us to finally offload without repercussion, with others merely practising some active listening skills. As people of colour I feel it's time we really grappled with

what it is that we really do want. I know for myself it's really clear, especially when it happens, what I definitely don't want, but much less tangible to imagine and call for what I really really do want.

Like what do we want from our "allies"? Do we want/need "allies" at all - for me it suggests an other/them in solidarity with me/us. I want a world in which all people feel as personally affronted, angry, frustrated as me - because it IS personal to them, and not just cos they have a friend or a lover or a neighbour who is a person of colour, a queer of colour. How do we achieve that?

I know that once I've been really clear in my expectations and position, and that it has been clearly expressed, I'll feel much more able to actively challenge and if required remove myself from people who just aren't doing it - or only as a hobby, or only when there's a pair of brown eyes watching. Because for me the problem isn't only experiences and examples of racism in our communities, it's the fact that I sit patiently waiting for someone else to notice and spark the debate or damn well sort the problem out and generally find myself treading in the water of silence and inaction. Most times no-one else raises an eyebrow, and I feel too annoyed and inarticulate and frustrated to do much about it myself.

Maybe in the past part of my "coping" has been to work on the assumption that people are just damn ignorant, or I've not been asking the right question, or making the right demand. Yeah yeah yeah, I know, still taking personal responsibility for it all. I just feel that when "I" and "they" know for sure that ignorance or a foray into postmodernist tongue in cheek humour (cos surely we can just laugh about our oppressions now) is not an excuse, then we can really start talking and challenging and feeling the pain and joy of change together.

So as you see there's plenty of things I still want to know, and more pressingly, there's lots of things I'd like you to know too.



AFRO-PUNK:

Melissa Steiner

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I was sooo excited to discover that Pogo Cafe in Hackney, London was screening the 2003 documentary *Afro-Punk: the roll 'n' roll nigger experience*, directed by James Spooner. This was a film I'd wanted to see for ages, but hadn't been able to afford buying it and getting it sent to New Zealand while I was still living there, ah, wonderful big cities where you can actually have films like this screening for free at your local anarchist, vegan café!

The documentary interviews various people who are black and identify as punks or are part of the punk rock scene, looking at various issues that arise for them due to that combination of factors, such as feelings of isolation, back lash from their families and black communities, inter-racial dating, their inspirations and role models and so on.

I think it's less likely you'd be the only "person of colour" at an Auckland punk or alternative show compared to what I've heard about America, I mean, I've never lived in the US, but I reckon generally Auckland is not too bad when it comes to racial diversity in most of the scenes, maybe? Maybe it's just cos we're smaller, and so the scenes are smaller.

And that said, obviously I have been in situations where I've been like one of two "people of colour" at said punk or alternative show, but no one ever points this out, or seems to care for whatever reason, even though I notice. Plus, when I used to work in Otara I'd occasionally seen kids who take on the "punk" look and how weird that is for everyone around them, because it's seen as a "white" thing.

I think it's pretty clear that assimilation is generally assumed as the way brown people will exist in scenes populated mainly by white people, and this is annoying and insidious and hegemonic and generally boring. I'm totally interested in the situation and what this means and I was keen to watch this film to see what kind of a fuss Afro-Punks kick up in their own scenes in the States.

As you can probably guess, most people interviewed had a fairly hard time with their

families accepting their mohawks or choice of music or friends or whatever, and lots got beaten up on the street in their neighbourhood, girls got called dykes and boys got called fags etc etc, and most really wanted to know more black punks cos most of their friends and girlfriends/boyfriends were white. Maybe that is all pretty obvious, but it was totally interesting, cos when do you actually get to hear these stories from the mouths of actual non-white punks? You hear a lot from white people in riot grrrl and activist and punk scenes lamenting the lack of diversity in their scenes, and taking a good look at their own racism and working for change and stuff, but very rarely do you hear from people actually experiencing being black/brown and punk. And it always annoyed me that people would go on about riot grrrl etc being a white scene cos it ignored the fact their were non-white people in those scenes making music and zines and organising shows and djing (incidentally, in the latest *F-word* zine, reproductive justice campaigner Loretta Ross has the same complaint about people who dismiss the Women's Movement as white and middle class, she's all like, what about the work that I did and other black women and working class women in that movement...).

Yeah, so it was cool to have those voices and opinions presented, and the only white people on the documentary were friends of the interviewees who were mainly just in the background. There's some live footage too by Bad Brains, Cipher etc, and all in all it was a pretty smoothly made documentary despite the fact it was the director's first.

The gender split amongst those interviewed was really good, and I liked that the women were dealt with as separate individuals, not lumped together and assumed to have a shared experience because they were women (unlike for example the latest *Vibe* magazine – oh, maybe I'll just rant about that later).

I liked the fact the documentary wasn't all doom and gloom too, like, obviously the negatives need to be said, but it wasn't all "oh poor me" or

THE ROCK 'N' ROLL NIGGER EXPERIENCE

anything, the shots of live shows and the passion of most of those interviewed and pictures of hot black kids with coloured mohawks and piercings served to present and exciting and vibrant view of what it is to identify as Afro-Punk, and I mean, punk is meant to be about adversity and politics right? It's what gives it its fuel. As a few of the interviewees said, where do people think music like this originated from? By and large, black musicians with guitars. Punk can be *easily* owned by black people.

There were definite problems with the doco, for example the kinds of bands the director focused on weren't very diverse and a lot weren't what I'd think of as "punk" (but probably fit into someone else's idea of

punk), for example there was lots of heavy rock, and "good" singing. Plus, when the interviewees were name-checking their heroes, I don't get

why X-Ray Spex wasn't mentioned? But I think probably that just kind of illustrates this film's totally American focus, and its bent towards a definition of punk as hardcore and rock, rather than riot grrrl, indie and experimental. And of course the dude making it would've totally just been focussing on bands that fit his tastes which is absolutely fair enough.

No mention was made of queer black punks, and I don't know if it's just me but I always assume queer and punk go hand in hand, but am often disappointed (like, even the feminist book *Pretty In Punk* only discusses queer very briefly and as a tiny phenomenon). Not that I was necessarily expecting to have the documentary also talk about how it is to be black, punk and queer (though that would be a damn interesting and important documentary for someone to make!), but I just felt that the question of inter-racial dating which was covered kind of just assumed that we were only interested in the problem for hetero couples.

Also, interestingly no mention of feminist issues was made, I have become so used to American

riot grrrl critiques of the male-centric hardcore scene that I kept waiting for a commentary after each shot of men slamming their bodies around at hardcore shows, and that never came. But then actually, one of the women interviewed talked about how much fun she had slamming around to a band and ending up with bruises, and it was super refreshing just to hear her say this, and not having her being forced into focusing on her gender or being made to make broad statements about what other women might have experienced. Obviously she personally had a great time!

Normally I find it suspect when issues of gender are glossed over, but then considering the amount of writing there is out there about prioritising

gender over race or the possibility of combining those issues,

I think the director probably

purposefully didn't mention "feminism", but did a good job of including black women's perspectives.

I think it's pretty clear that assimilation is generally assumed as the way brown people will exist in scenes populated mainly by white people, and this is annoying and insidious and hegemonic and generally boring.

After one of the shots of a hardcore show it was really interesting to hear the (white) kids in the audience being asked if they actually knew what the dude they were shouting along to was talking about lyrically. And most of them had a pretty good semblance of an idea, and were totally down with the fact he was singing about anti-racism and black power. But as the guy who was singing told us, he's not really singing for hardcore kids, he's singing for black people who often aren't in the audience, so it's all a slightly weird situation.

Probably the most interesting interviewee for me was Mariko Jones who was in her early twenties and was highly involved in the scene DJ-ing etc. She lived in a middle class neighbourhood, had never dated a black guy and was sometimes teased by other black people as having a Valley Girl accent. The way the documentary captured her, she seemed pretty unsure of herself, stumbling over her words, her hands twisting together when she talked – she was presented as having a lot of internal conflict. She did say some weird stuff, like she seemed to feel she needed to say she was

making t shirts with the words “black is beautiful”, but also how she did sort of wish she could meet a black guy but seemed to doubt he could possibly be into what she was into, and cos she wasn’t putting herself out there all sexy she implied black men wouldn’t really be into her.

But then later I wondered if how I perceived her on the film was more a product of what the director was “directing” me to see, due to the way he interpreted her statements rather than any “real” self-doubt on her part, after all, the whole film was made through his eyes. Perhaps Mariko Jones wasn’t going through any kind of crisis at all, that was just how she was, a black girl that didn’t want to be seen as “the black girl” that just hung with white people – so what? Is that a problem? Is she any less sure of her identity than

the woman who talked about

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world**

symphony out of the sound of us swallowing our tongues
It's not as though Mariko was ashamed to be black, she was proud of it, but just maybe didn't think about it as much. But I guess you can't really tell much about people from a documentary however, perhaps Mariko really was feeling weird in the head about it all, having a conflict about “who she was”. But if this is a documentary about diversity, then surely she's just another voice adding to the plethora of identities available to black people who embrace punk? This is not a criticism of the director by the way, how else can you make a film except through your own eyes? This is more just the back and forth debate I had

how she started off adopting the punk look, and then later connected this look with the way many Africans traditionally pierced themselves and cut their hair, and so began seeing the way she dressed as a way to connect with her African roots? I mean, clearly we are supposed to think that is a more intelligent and healthy identity to take on, compared to Mariko's “like, um, you

know”s...*(they want to make a*

in my head on the bus on the way home. I think the director really picked a great range of people to interview.

Anyway, on the bus ride home I also got to thinking about a conversation the guy who had organised the screening had with my friend straight after the film. He'd clearly felt a bit uncomfortable about aspects of it, (e.g. the lack of discussion around feminist issues, no mention made of the Bad Brains' homophobia etc). But the thing is, I really felt like the film was so important regardless of these factors, and it made me wonder why we had such different reactions afterwards. Why, despite the fact that I am usually hyper-critical of documentaries for their lack of queer or feminist content, and that the music portrayed in this film wasn't really anything I particularly cared for, felt nothing but exhilaration after I'd seen it seen it? He was white (I assume, though that's always a dodgy assumption to make), and I am not, can it be as base as that? I think it is. I think that's ok to admit. It's so important to have the chance to see people who look like you (and by that, I mean have the same or similar skin colour, hair etc), doing stuff like playing in bands and being punks and making zines if that's what's you're into too, because it confirms you exist in this world and have potential allies who understand where you're coming from. And people who are white and into those things actually don't really know what it's like to not have that, because their faces are reflected everywhere all the time. And even though there's this whole "kill yr heroes" mentality, its bullshit, cos they're lucky to have people who are like them to learn from and then reject. And of course "people of colour" have these potential heroes too, as these kinds of films show, but we have to hunt for them, and I guess it just means more when we find them and find each other. People don't tend to condemn other punk documentaries for not including any black or brown faces, by the way, in case no one noticed. Anyway, I was just really grateful to the guy who'd started this train of thought off, because he'd given me the opportunity to see this film to be honest. And these days I'm thinking more carefully about what aspects of music & underground culture and politics I want to pursue, and what aspects I really feel like I can just let go, that don't really matter to me, or don't resonate with me. I used to worry in my mid-20s that I was getting less hard line with my politics, but now at the good old age of 29, queer, brown & female I realise that sometimes when you feel like that it's cos you're trying to fit into someone else's ideas of what you should care about.

raju rage of queers bash back, a group addressing hate attacks and issues of violence. to join up / find out more visit www.queersbashback.wordpress.com or email qbb@riseup.net

Why is involving the police in our communities a bad idea? How does it contribute to perpetuating discrimination, creating divides and putting members of our community at even more risk of harm? Why does harm usually go much more beyond homophobic bashing, for people of colour? What other kinds of harm are we enduring as being part of a racist (as well as sexist, classist, ableist, homophobic and transphobic) mainstream society that is governed by an institutionally racist (as well as the rest already mentioned) police force who are dictated to by our equally unjust government policies? How are we endangered further when feminist, queer and trans communities welcome the police for our supposed protection? Who are they protecting and who are they harming? Surely there must be other strategies of being safe within our communities and outside of them? What are they and what can we do?

These are some questions I have. I have been trying to find the answers and solutions. I have not been feeling very safe recently. In fact, I have never really been safe as a brown immigrant to this country and that was before I was even consciously nonconforming. This obviously shapes my opinions and ideas about the police and also about my communities who wish to welcome them and work with them.

I grew up with an extremely abusive father who was frustrated with the fact that despite being an educated man he couldn't make a decent living when he moved us to this country in order to support his family. His release was to beat up on my mother, my brother and me. He put up with any racism he faced by disciplining us against it, teaching us to speak English at a high standard, at the cost of our own languages, and study extremely hard so that we could have a good future. This again came with beatings which went beyond discipline which was an unjust excuse to harm us. We were never protected by the police, from his behaviour; instead this was a situation that they would not interfere with since it was 'common in our South Asian culture' and something we should work out 'within our community'. That is what they said. My mother took years to leave him after all her attempts for help were continually ignored and finally she left him in 1985 which coincided with the *Women's National Commission criticising the police in their report Violence Against Women for the reluctance of police to interfere in domestic disputes where women reporting were often treated as if*

they were responsible for their own victimisation.

After that we lived in a women's refuge, which comprised mostly of black and mixed race families and there was always police around, usually keeping an eye on us children as they considered us 'anti social' because we would hang out on the streets in a big multicoloured crowd since there were many children living there and nowhere to go on weekends since we had no money to do so. We were used to the police being around, male police officers being able to invade the sanctuary of the 'women and children only' space.

I went to predominantly black schools, (I didn't actually feel like a minority until I went to university and later found the queer and trans scene) and again there were always police hanging around the school gates looking for trouble, moving children home quickly. In my adult life I realised that this was not commonplace amongst my white peers who talked about their childhood experiences. In fact none of what I had experienced was. I remember clearly the police being heavy handed with my black male friends when we were in a mixed group of friends whether there was a dispute between us or not and we were just hanging out. The Police always viewed it as the black kids leading the white kids astray and my white friends always seemed to get away, whilst my black friends were cautioned. The cops seemed to get a kick out of it and liked the fact that we couldn't do anything but just stand there and watch, especially when the person watching was someone's girlfriend, brother or sister. I knew then not to trust the police. It taught us a huge lesson and from then on my white male friends acted more as allies, understanding their privilege on the streets and how racist cops were. The police were everyone's enemy growing up in my world, from peers to our parents alike.

The years that my brother became a teenager to a young adult he was constantly harassed by police, always in trouble with them for hanging around and socialising with friends. They would question and search him (for drugs and weapons or stolen goods) regularly and ask him why he was in the neighbourhood whenever he was just on his way home. If there was a racist attack against him he was still treated as it was his fault, never dealt with as a serious case. It made my mother furious and disempowered since she could not protect him from them. Once she caught police officers harassing him and tried to tell them it was ok, that he was her son

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and they rudely told her not to interfere with police business. I even remember her holding his hand whenever we walked through the airport on family holidays even though he was a grown man, in attempt of making him look more submissive so he wouldn't be targeted by officials. This was a pure case of racial profiling of course. It just became an accepted occurrence, something he should guard himself against by dressing a certain way and learning to talk to officials in a certain manner, by trying to protect himself with self defence, which the police would then call assault, when he fought back with his abusers, since no one else would protect him. He has struggled all his life to differentiate himself from the perceived 'criminal' and 'ASBO' stereotype. His solution (like many other people of colour) to assimilate and present himself as respectable in his suit and well paying job, travel in a flash car (instead of the street and public transport) which give him both safety and status and therefore protection as a male of colour. However, even today, whenever he is away from his 9-5 city job and goes to hip hop gigs on weekends or even the gym he faces the same police harassment that he has fought so hard to escape. They will assume his car is stolen for example and then fine him for speeding or another small misdemeanour when they realise it isn't, rather than lose face. I've seen this happen to all my black male friends and family all through my life. It even happened to me occasionally, since I was masculine presenting. I remember being harassed at the age of 12 by police officers for riding a boy's bike, they thought I had stolen it since it was my older brothers bike and big for me. They taunted me for being a girl who wanted to be a boy, making fun of me and then proceeded to scare me by taking all my details down and saying they would have to pursue in the formal way with paperwork when they obviously didn't. It was a big joke to them. I was scared shitless in case my mother found out since she was already upset by the police attention my brother was getting.

Now, the more male I present the more I get harassed, refused entry to bars, followed in shops, stopped and searched on the street and at stations, treated with suspicion in the airports, abused by strangers for looking like a terrorist and so forth. Before I got my British nationality status that cost me lots of £'s I was constantly being told I had no right to re-enter the country despite living here since I was 5, despite England colonising both my homelands, Kenya

and India long ago. In fact every time we went back home to Kenya in the summer holidays when I was growing up there was a problem re entering the country, even though we had British Overseas citizenship and even though we worked hard to contribute to western society as immigrants, we were still treated as lowlifes, unequal, considered scum.

Now in the climate of 'terrorism', as a brown male presenting person the attention from police has reached an all time high. I am too afraid to run in the tube if I am late, especially if I am carrying a backpack which I usually am. *Jean Charles Menezes was shot down in Stockwell where I currently live for looking like a terrorist after the London bombings and no one has been held responsible, no justice has been granted to this day.* I often cannot use public toilets since I am transgender, plus I am brown. I am treated with utmost suspicion that goes beyond the unjustified humiliation that many white transgender people have to face. Travelling to visit my partner and friends who live abroad I have been strip searched and nearly missed connecting flights, my luggage often searched more than once. I am often violated and humiliated, asked why I'm carrying so many books as if I shouldn't be able to read and whether I am trying to relocate and my possessions being taken away for surveillance, officials asking under their breath if I am a boy or a girl if they are not playing guessing games about it between each other for some discriminatory fun. I try not to travel with anything valuable. Most of my white partners and friends coming to visit me have had no problems what so ever. Sometimes they are understanding but sometimes not, calling me paranoid when I talk about racism or over reacting. They just don't understand since this is not the treatment they get. As a brown trans male person I have found that you just can't complain. You have to just get on with it or else you are criticised for being whiney, angsty, paranoid, negative or even worse actually creating divides that actually already exist for us. We are not allowed to talk about race for instigating situations. For making people feel bad about their privilege.

I do not have faith in the police or the prison system and I am also losing faith in my trans and queer community because of this, because they welcome them.

Last year a very close family friend, someone I grew up with in the refuge and consider my little brother was arrested and put in prison. He was banged up in a closed cell in isolation for a year, instead of being in an open detention centre because they needed to 'investigate his nationality'. He is a British citizen (but

they suspected he was an illegal immigrant solely because he was brown, because he said he was Indian instead of British. He of course was referring to his entitled cultural origin, his heritage, his ethnicity). It took them until the day before his release to find out the correct information. Apparently, they claimed, If he was in a detention centre he could have (and presumed he would have) easily run away to avoid deportation. Furthermore, his disabled mother had requested they put him in a prison close to London so she could visit him easier and instead they locked him up in the Isle of White, miles away from London and requiring a ferry to cross over to get to. We were therefore restricted greatly in our visits to see him. Our family have been so upset by what he had to endure, the unfair and cruel treatment that has obviously damaged him. But there is nothing we can do, we are powerless. We just have to put up with this treatment that we have become well used to expect.

Last year whilst signing on Job Seekers Allowance I received a compulsory interview to become a Community Support Police Officer. My own mother pleaded with me to tell them I couldn't attend. The 5 years before living in Hackney, a 'diverse' borough in London, 'multicultural' and filled with 'ethnic minorities' I had witnessed countless acts of violence against people of colour by police, including one man begging his mother not to let them arrest him and take him away because he feared being beaten up in the police van. The mother insisted going with him but the police pushed her way. She managed to give her son a mobile phone so he could record what happened. It is no myth that black people have been beaten up and/or died in police custody: *Shiji Lapite in Hackney 1994, Harry Stanley in Hackney 1999, Sarah Thomas in Hackney 1999 and all the rest.* I saw innocent bystanders to this kind of police brutality arrested for stepping in and trying to stand up to the police. I saw undercover and plain clothes police officers provoke situations and enjoy the power trip.

I felt sick in my stomach getting the letter for that interview. Luckily I managed to avoid it, though I see many other people of colour joining the police force since the met police's strategy is to recruit ethnic minorities in order to improve their image, since their reputation has hit an all time low after the McPherson inquiry around the Stephen Lawrence case in 1999 and now Jean Charles Menezes as well as all the recent racism allegations that have caused Sir Ian Blair to step down. The McPherson Inquiry concluded that

the police force was 'institutionally racist' and defined it as 'the collective failure of an organisation to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture or ethnic origin. It can be seen or detected in processes, attitudes and behaviour which amount to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and racist stereotyping which disadvantage minority ethnic people'. The report also transformed the terms of the political debate about black people and criminal justice, the disproportionate rate at which black people suffered as victims of crime which had not previously featured in public awareness. The same experience has occurred for the recruitment of more females into the force, since the met police have also been accused of sexism and now of homophobia and transphobia and so they are now trying to recruit LGBT people. *London Pride 2008 was sponsored by the Metropolitan police, complete with a job fair even though there was an incident with an LGBT police liaison officer threatening to arrest a trans woman for attempting to use the female toilets instead of coming to her aid.*

The police are not our friends, no matter how many LGBT's and BAME's they recruit (lets not say transgender or black by the way) There is no reassurance in having few 'good cops' since it is the met police's policies that are discriminatory and unchallenged and even the 'good cops' have to abide by them. LGBT and BAME people will not make the police force a better institution. The Police instead use them to beat on their own people so it looks less like discrimination since the system they work for mainly serves the interests of the white rich and privileged and not the 'anti social' like us. That is when they are not being beaten upon themselves by their colleagues (*Tarique Ghaffur is currently suing the met police for racial bias, bullying and discrimination and has been criticised by media and fellow police members for not stepping down after his accusation!*). Things have obviously not changed over the many years, though the propaganda the Met Police puts out portrays quite

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All is not what it seems. How can it be when stop and searches against black men have reached an all time high, when there are more black men in prison then at university? The way the police are trained is to approach young men of colour with violence as they have been trained to assume that we are all ASBOs and/or to expect that we will be carrying guns, knives, other weapons and now even bombs.

a different friendly picture. All is not what it seems. How can it be when stop and searches against black men have reached an all time high, when there are more black men in prison then at university? Is that because they are black or because they are stupid or because they are mistreated? The way the police are trained is to approach young men of colour with violence as they have been trained to assume that we are all ASBOs and/or to expect that we will be carrying guns, knives, other weapons and now even bombs. (anti social behavioural order is from the crime and disorder act of 1998 which has been criticised for having a remarkably wide potential coverage which could be misused. It has also been criticised for marginalising certain issues such as offending which takes place in private spheres that is less visible. Say crimes like corruption in governments and other 'corporate crime' which is more detrimental to the economy and contributes to more unequal wealth distribution in populations which in turn leads to extremes of affluence and poverty, which then causes more crime, since it has been proven that the main reason for people committing crimes is poverty. But the law does not want to tackle the real crime that takes place as part of the capitalist world, it is not in their interests since they are a part of it and benefit from it).

Instead, with new laws put in place it has become increasingly easier to suspect individuals on the grounds of terrorism and then carry out the 'necessary procedures' then invade basic human rights. Great, right? We will all be safer? Wrong? It gives the police more scope to harass and scapegoat innocent brown people and generally allows them more invasive techniques, whether this is necessary or not, more usually not. I have been verbally abused and seen other brown people being abused and targeted for just being brown and appearing to look Muslim. This perpetuates fear and racism outside and inside of cultures where people want to be differentiated from looking like 'Islamic fundamentalists' or harm those that do (note all the killings post 9/11 in retaliation where many innocent Muslims and non Muslims were killed just because they looked Muslim, basically by being brown and having facial hair). It wasn't their

fault of course since we all look the same right? and we should try harder not to? Islamophobia is taking the world by storm, conveniently distracting from all the criminal activity that happens in the white western world that is really detrimental to our health and safety. It is creating a moral divide, fuelling separatism. Islamophobia is infiltrating everywhere imaginable including LGBT

spaces who single out Islamic countries as being the most homophobic and 'oppressed Islamic countries' being in great need of western liberation i.e. backing gay troops in the war with Afghanistan (*pink paper article in Oct 2001*) and Iraq even thought the militarisation in these countries of war have caused more homophobia than before, even though many non Islamic (Christian) countries around the world are homophobic.

You are either 'for' or 'against' and In general people of colour often do not want to be mistaken for being a terrorist, anti social, a low life criminal as it is unsafe to do so and so they will often assimilate into mainstream western society by wearing western clothes, shaving their beards, cutting their hair so it is 'well groomed', taking off their veils and headscarves, changing their ethnic names to western ones, joining the civil services, army, police force and so on. Only to be treated with suspicion, with low expectations and as second class citizens, having to work harder than white peers and still getting paid less and bullied and racially abused if we manage anything better than that. Either that or be criticised by the white dominated alternative communities for assimilating, when they are actually more privileged and in a better place in order to resist it.

As a person of colour who is a male feminine transgender feminist who is anti war, where do I belong? Which side do I take? Who is looking out for my interests? Where can I be safe from harm? Nowhere it seems...

If I am not allowed to be me.

If I am not allowed to speak up.

If I am not allowed to challenge or criticise.

If others do not read beneath and between the lines.

If those around me do not think, do not choose to act or support those who suffer discrimination.

A conversation with Jaheda Choudhury – poet, performer and femme of power.

by Nazmia Jamal
nazmiaejamal@googlemail.com

10th September 2008. BFI Southbank.

Jaheda was in London for the launch of *Femmes of Power* by Del Lagrace Volcano and Ulrika Dahl.

This is partly a transcript and partly an edited gloss of the very long conversation we had – most of the bits about cheese and bird watching have been edited out.

Jaheda Choudhury: I encourage white guilt because I feel like they get closer to slightly knowing what it feels like to be me or be you.

Nazmia Jamal: I think that's right. A huge part of what characterises me is guilt and people don't understand that.

JC: And it's alright to feel it, you are switched onto the past and its consequences. Guilt is useful, particularly for white men, even if you can't put your finger on it... guilt is the first step.

NJ: I think first step taken longer. I've seen real guilt at race awareness workshops, for example at the workshop Humey and I ran at Westhill Wotever, but then it was followed by a performance where someone blacked up and barely anyone batted an eyelid – after the discussions we had it was disheartening.

JC: As an artist I wonder why can't they black up? There is nothing left we can do. What's the difference between our feelings as black people and all those Indians that burnt down the cinemas when *Fire* was released?

NJ: But it was one of the only representations I have seen in that community of a non-white person and it was a stereotype- they didn't justify it as art. There was no thought behind it and there was thought behind *Fire*.

JC: Art doesn't need to be intellectual; it can be responsive or a reaction... I make hip hop and generally queer women stay away from that because of its sexist, racist and homophobic

image. But it's still a language and community and culture and form of poetry you have to understand for it to not offend you or affect you... I have to walk through and operate in these environments. My girlfriend and I performed at a hip-hop show and I didn't rap a single word in English. I don't need a stage name – Jaheda means warrior... no one can fuck with that shit. I asked the crowd to feel my words; I performed in Bangla. It captured their attention and the feedback was really positive – we'd captured the difference that hip-hop came from in the first place. We were the only dykes in the room and as soon as I step on that stage I represent everything you hate but as soon as I open my mouth you can't help but like me.

I have no time for white people... educating white people. The poem I am going to be spitting tonight is about being a Muslim woman within a Muslim community. Watch from afar and you will educate yourself if you want to – I don't give a fuck about anybody else, I am not here to educate anybody else – but if you enter my realm, enter my space, we'll get into the ring together...

NJ: That's where we are learning to be I think... this issue of *Race Revolt* seems to be about that... Why are we going around educating white people...

JC: ...when we are not educating ourselves at all.

Where are we? The BFI? Oooh filmi schmilmi! There is nothing northern about this place at all!

NJ: I wanted to know if you were happy with the femme book? Your photos and the text?

JC: Yeah, very happy.

NJ: I was quite frustrated that your letter was shorter than the others (*Ulrika wrote 'love letters' to a number of women in the book that were printed alongside Del's photos*).

JC: I liked it. Sometimes you can say too much. The love letter she wrote to me was very precise, really caring and very on point to who I am and what I like to do and the way she

perceives me... it wasn't like the other ones...

NJ: I found lots of the book frustrating...

JC: I let my 16 year old mentee, a young grime artist read it, he loved it - he was absolutely amazed by the variations of femme, the fact that there were these women who existed in this world that he walks in that they thought like this, that people thought of themselves like that... he got most of it but some of it was a bit too academic.

NJ: Yes it's clearly an academic person trying to not be academic. I judge things by my students, unless my kids don't get what it's saying there's no point.

JC: Yeah, a five year old, my grandma, should all feel an element of it... I don't want to be specifically geared towards one type of person... I want to go everywhere and say the things that I say. I worked on the Ain't No Black project (*youth arts project against race violence, HS*) with 20 odd young people and when I first went in they read my hair and nails and made assumptions but I don't hide my life. I talk about my bird... I reclaim that shit, the term 'bird' - birds are beautiful, birds fly so high, they have beautiful amazing feathers; their faces, their beaks, what they do, how they survive... All those things; they're independent, they're sexy, they're unbelievable.

NJ: I was frustrated by the whole book - certain people were allowed voices and others got letters- it is a book about their friends, which they admit, and a specific kind of femme. I felt like it was mainly about going to the hairdressers, painting your nails and how you have sex.

JC: That's one thing I don't like about it - get the fuck out of my bedroom.

NJ: To me there were not enough people saying, 'I exist as a femme without my war paint'. By the terms of the book I can't exist as a femme until I've put on a negligee instead of my flannel pyjamas. There are people who move in the world as femmes but aren't seen like that and the book reinforced my feeling of invisibility.

JC: I think they were specifically looking at that kick yer in the head ballsy femme...

NJ: The book seems to set up a hierarchy of femme-ness and that's my problem with it... plus the lack of gender variation. Where are the femme transmen for example?

JC: I am so bored of men being involved with girls' things.

NJ: Is femme a girls' thing?

JC: When bitches like me and Ulrika take space men try to stick their oars and their dicks in...

I learnt about Phoolan Devi from my father. I grew up understanding I was part of three fights - independence from the British, from India and from Pakistan. My father made me think about what place we held in those revolutions, in that revolution, where we as a family were - these were our bedtime stories. When I was in my twenties I started researching more about her and later when I started Sphere people would call me 'Phoolan Devi'ah, I was bad! For three years while I was recruiting people for the Sphere project I would just go up to South Asian women and find out if they were gay, I could usually tell. Actually my gaydar might have been a little doubtful around you possibly... but a lot of people ooze lesbo....I would still have approached you though. I'd say, 'This is not a chat up line...' then find out if you were gay and interested in the project. We made an outdoor installation piece telling the stories of the women involved. Once I was out in the gay village and saw a little black head bobbing around in a sea of white women and I just stormed in there and yanked this girl out and told her about the project...lets be lesbefriends... Asian women, particularly more up north than down south are often so afraid to mingle with other Asian women because I might be your sister from down the street who'll go and tell Abdul who'll go and tell Faisal...

NJ: I think that is the same everywhere...

JC: But down south, in London particularly, you're a lot more approachable, queer women, there is Kiss, Club Kali...

NJ: To be honest it's always been easier for me to be around white people. I grew up around white people.

JC: That's what my other friend Naz says too!

NJ: I was involved in Ladyfest London in 2002 and although right now I'm finding it really hard to be part of that community, at the time it was just much easier to be around people whose parents (I thought) accepted them and who didn't feel any kind of shame about who they were. I just needed to be around those people so I could

get to a place where I didn't feel that terrible about myself, whereas if I'd come out into a queer community of Asians I think it would have taken a lot longer to get to the place I am at now.

JC: That's the same story many of my Asian friends have told me.

NJ: In Blackfist I ended up bonding with people over with food. I'd met Humey and Heena at Ladyfest London and thought they were terrifying...so serious and political...

JC: Yeah, they're hardcore aren't they? Humey and Heena...

NJ: At the time I was like - who are these Asian women who I find so fucking scary? And then maybe a year later we were at this festival in Bristol and me and Humey found ourselves at this long table chopping garlic for 60 odd people and it was like being at home. We've cooked together a few times since then. Sachi, Humey and I tried to make samosas, which was a disaster we bonded over. It felt really important, exclusive...something that I couldn't do in the same way with my white friends. It's been especially nice with Sachi because he is from Kenya like my family so we use Swahili words in the kitchen. I don't have South Asian words for most food so it is fun to do that and feel at home...actually I didn't realise I was mixing Swahili and Gujarati until I was about 17...

JC: I was like that with Bangla - using Bangla words in English and wondering why people didn't understand.

NJ: So tell me about your other role models?

JC: I have a picture of Kali - I love it. I love Kali and Durgama because they are sisters and they do the same thing. I don't believe in the effigies of gods but I think what the Hindu religion really cleverly did was create these amazing goddesses - Durgama, Kali, Lakshmi - amazing female characters that'll kick you HARD. Of course there is Phoolan Devi too. I don't see the difference between Phoolan Devi, myself, Kalima, Ulrika, my mother, you... we all have that in us - we just have to find that.

NJ: So when you were shaping your femme-ness was that a conscious decision?

JC: No, I never even thought about my sexuality or my identity as a queer anything...When I got into my early twenties I actually got a girlfriend. Before that, even as a young child my earliest memories are of canoodling next to a girl. I'd have a best friend and then we would split up and

I'd get another. There were always girls at the door when I was growing up. My father used to say he was glad that I was not a boy because he would have had loads of grandchildren! I never thought anything was wrong. We were brought up not talking about sex so really and truly whatever I did and with whomever it would have been wrong. All I knew was that the act of sex was wrong so I couldn't tell anyone but I didn't occur to me that who I was doing it with was wrong.

NJ: So no lesbian crisis?

JC: Not really. I had a crisis of finding myself and about to being free.

NJ: Family?

JC: Yes and cultural restraints. The one thing I knew, regardless of my sexuality, is that I didn't know who I was, what I was, what I wanted to be, how to think, or if I liked cheese... My dad was all about education and knowledge. We went to school, then to Bangla school, then my dad would go through the Suras with us. Weekends we went to the mosque from 10 until 2pm then I'd ride at the stables then when I came back there would be chores or we'd watch wrestling. My dad encouraged us all - brothers and sisters - to wrestle.

From Year 8 or 9, right through to the end of school we were smack bang in the middle of a Combat 18 area in Sheffield. One of the local Asian boys got the sister of the leader of the group pregnant and so the response was to surround the school and beat the shit out of us as many times as they wanted to, just to show they could.

The police stopped us from getting the local bus to school and instead we had two police escorted coaches to drive us right into the schoolyard. We'd go through every morning while a bunch of skinhead white men surrounded our school and threw things at our coach. Every evening the bus would pick us up but if you got detention it would leave without you and you were fucked. I was about 14 when me and this other lad got detention. We had a sense of how to protect ourselves and my brothers made me promise to stick to a specific route home so they would know when to expect me. So this boy and I were walking home across the field between the two areas and this car rolls up, no headlights... my mate told me to run and he ran behind me - he probably could have gone a lot faster without me. The next thing I know is I'm out cold. I woke up in a pool of blood, a mixture of mine and his and he was completely out cold. I knew I'd been hit on the head and I crawled over to him and tried to

wake him. My brothers came, realising something had happened, and they scooped us up and took us home. My mum fainted. An ambulance was called for the boy who then stayed in a coma for 6 months. He's physically alright now but the spark has gone out in his eyes... he is not alive inside anymore.

My dad was a bit like Gandhi, he was looked up to, he was very peaceful and didn't want friction, but he was also like Malcolm X – by any means necessary... at that point, with me in his arms, told my brothers –what ever you need to do, do it. The next day, boys gathered from Bradford, Manchester, London, all over... they congregated in Sheffield and walked into the white area and mashed up everything white. The next day the same thing happened in reverse. This went on for a good few years and people forgot what it was about. None of it was televised or reported.

So, I had no time. I wasn't privileged enough to have the time to think about my queer identity like that because there is so much more to deal with. I'm not saying it's not important or that everyday I don't face it but there are other things that are just as important that people are going through.

My brother doesn't like me because I'm gay and stand up for what I do. He's very much an Islamic person. He needed to protect the women of the house and community after what happened. The burden on our boys' shoulders – what they put on themselves and what the community and their mothers expect...

I went out with one white woman – amazing – but there was no Sharukh Khan in there... there was no masala in there, no sting. I need a girl to understand that when I raise my voice it's not because I'm aggressive it's just how I speak in Bangla...

NJ: Yeah, although it's not always obvious. I am seeing another South Asian and after a long time one day he said, 'Oh, so you behave like that because you are Indian!'

JC: When we opened up the Sphere exhibition the first women to walk in were three hijab wearing dykes. Amazing.

NJ: In terms of femme I think the most amazing femme space I've been in was an Eid party that we were invited to by my mum's Saudi friend when I was at school. My mum and I wore these really modest, plain shalwaar kameez because we

didn't know anyone who wore chadour and didn't know what to expect, but when we got there, the upstairs hall where all the women were was this insane riot of colour and spangles and the impression I came away with was of a lot of rather risqué clothing (I was a prudish teenager). To me those women define femme in a way no one else can because they were not dressing for anyone but themselves – it wasn't about sex or their butch – just, this is who I am, this is how I want to look in my space. I wish that there was a way of representing that more fully. You are the only Muslim woman in the book right? I think there is so much work to do in representing Muslim femininity, even if it is just for other Muslim women, because it is just not represented.

JC: I ran away from home in the end. I managed to get on a bus to London then slept under the arches in Brick Lane because I didn't know anywhere else in London. I hated London and snuck on a coach to Glasgow, then Newcastle then Leeds where I got into a refuge. I left because I was frustrated – I'd been given all this 'freedom' – education, a horse, to fight, to climb a tree but I still felt trapped. The hostel in Leeds was daunting. Food shopping was totally strange. I thought I had to live like English people and that scared me. I didn't know how to make English food or shop in supermarkets – for three months I lived on bread and cheese. In some ways I was completely streetwise but in others... eventually a woman at the hostel noticed and told me 'English people don't live like that and you're not an English person and you don't have to live like that.'

While I was at the hostel there was a horrific, bizarre incident... There was a girl at the hostel around the same age as me. My queer identity wasn't there yet but as soon as we saw each other we were buzzing off each other... 17 years old, cheeky, wild. One of the women who ran the refuge was a bit fat and a bit ugly and at 17 that was fun to play with... we'd say things that were a bit mean just to make sure we were free...we thought we were in a space where nobody would punish us but what we didn't realise was that at the same time we were doing that, this person had her own issues and we triggered her in lots of ways and one night when we were alone in the hostel she attacked us both, beat us up and raped us and told us no one would believe us if we told. 'Who is going to believe you, you little slag...little runaway Paki chick?' When you're 17 and someone says that to you they are authority, she ran the place. After that my friend and I stayed in the same room and hardly came out for

months. Now I occasionally see that girl, on the bus, in the street and we leave it at that. A few years after the hostel she was forced into a marriage in Afghanistan. She is actually really happy now because her husband is a gentle nice guy and they have kids. We can't get together though because when we do we see that incident in each other's eyes and we don't want that in our children's lives.

It was difficult cos you go from knowing that about men to this woman attacking us and also knowing that you like women and not fully knowing that. It took a while to adjust – there was a lot of hate in my sexuality – I maybe didn't respect women as much as I should have. I did that typical Asian boy thing of thinking goris [*white women*] are there for fun – I never went out with Asian birds or Black women because I didn't want any of that shit...

Feminism in my understanding doesn't exist without our men. If you go into the paddy fields of Bangladesh the men are working in the fields – but the women, those fucking bitches are grinding those grains, giving birth, cooking, keeping everything together. Where is that weak? It was my dad that taught me feminism. It was my dad who taught me how to fight and to cook. I want to be able to make feminism universal and get women to recognise how powerful they are but not with the western type of feminism that exists today...and I want to do something to incorporate our men.

NJ: One of the most exciting times in my life was when I first started doing Ladyfest and my younger brother came to a couple of the early benefits with me. In all the years I've been doing this stuff- putting on gigs and events – I think my brother is the only straight, bio male of colour who has come to an event.

JC: That's why I mentor. I want to make time for our boys.

NJ: I've been thinking a lot about Asian masculinity. I mean, butch/femme feels very western. And western masculinity and eastern masculinity are totally different things... I wonder if that affects the way you see yourself as a femme?

Watch from afar and you will educate yourself if you want to – I don't give a fuck about anybody else, I am not here to educate anybody else – but if you enter my realm, enter my space, we'll get into the ring together...

JC: I don't really like labels... but my girlfriend is probably a soft butch....but I'm the one who sits like this [*legs apart*] and she sits like this [*legs crossed*]. I don't know what it means to be femme or if I am a femme – see if the book was *Butches of Power* I'd still have a place in it...

NJ: Do you think the notion of what butch is would be substantially different from what is presented in this book if it was presented from a non-western point of view? Is there already quite a lot of femme in south Asian masculinity?

JC: Well we dress similarly, our men wear makeup, we eat together and live in close, tactile communities...

The reason I have an issue with western feminism is that they've put these labels on everything, which ends up being restrictive. There is a restriction that the West has put on itself through racism, and this is very militant, but there is a power in our genetics that is much greater than anything white. Genetically we are superior and the labels and technology and hierarchies of the West are there to control that because technically we could wipe out all the whites in a generation just by shagging everyone. Done in a generation... as raw as that...

NJ: That is really disturbing.

JC: We as a race of people were being distracted by material goods and believing money is the most powerful thing, we have forgotten what genetic power we hold - hence why black men were hung by their testicles back in the day ...If I fuck you, you're dead...you're child will be black... The blacks were rounded up like dogs to build America. If every African in London stopped working the city would stop. We hold the power genetically - understand?

NJ: Yeah, it's a disturbing argument but yeah...

JC: Nobody lets you say this, there is no space to say this, but you get it because of the skin you are in.

Thanks to Jaheda being so open and also for the loan of her Dictaphone when mine died!

Thanks to Humaira for her infinite patience.

WHY SO BITTER MY DEAR?

Humaira Saeed
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I am editor and distributor, I am dial-an-objector. Here is a space for revolution in the making. We will build it together, share each other's words, each other's intent. We will create an activism of integrity, we will discuss.

Community. Against racism. It is happening. It is now. Any second the money will be where the mouth is. The walk will be like the talk. I can feel it.

At first I wrote a rant but then felt that it needed context, explanation, an introduction or a preface. I felt I needed to apologise for myself for ever having any reaction at all. For ever criticising. I still feel the need for damage limitation, incase this honesty creates a distance between myself and those in the activist world I talk about...

The mindset of this writing is one of pain, a time of depression and disillusionment. The edge of giving up on white-dominated activism altogether. But this is not so simple when the location of this white-dominated activism is also my home, inhabited by people I love, by people who inspire me, by people whose hands I want hold and words I want to absorb. So what do I lose if I leave this place? I lose it all. But these days it feels like a struggle to stay.

Since doing my first race workshop at a Ladyfest (feminist arts and music festival that happens several times a year in different locations) in 2005, I feel that I have become the race person. Ms dial-a-diversity. As though having a race workshop in the schedule makes for an aware and privilege-challenging event. And I resent it. These are necessary conversations to be having but I get the feeling that when I turn up and do these workshops I let any white-centric mentality off the hook. The event becomes 'good' and considerate of race and privilege by virtue of sending me an email and booking me a room. The whiteness of the event is challenged through my functional presence as brown. There's a term for this and it's called being a token.

I flit in and out of hope when it comes to race in feminism. Speaking to people in small groups, having one to ones, hosting these workshops; hope is there. When it's focused on, when it's spelled out, people do care. I know this. I see it and I feel it. The intention is honourable. I get it.

But it's not enough. And there comes a point when these intentions are almost destined to be empty. That they continue to be asserted is an insult. I wonder why so many feminist events use the words 'diversity' and 'inclusion' without ever considering the implications of these words. As though throwing them into the mission statement will make them real.

[An amusing workshop title from a Ladyfest stuck out recently, it was called 'Black and Asian women's issues', as though black and asian identities could only fit into the event though becoming pathologised. Are black and asian women's issues so 'other' to womens concerns being addressed throughout the rest of the festival that they need a special ghetto? Do black and asian women not have a place in all the rest of the festival? Or is the rest of the festival for the 'universal', (read white) woman? But again, no doubt this was a misguided attempt by organisers to be 'inclusive'.]

If events didn't feel the need to use those terms I think I would feel less incensed by their whiteness because at least then they would be acknowledging their limitations rather than cloaking them in patronising rhetoric. And I'm getting fed up with being expected to appreciate misguided and half-baked attempts at inclusion as though I'm being done a favour.

I will concede that a fair few people care. But when it comes to laying themselves on the line, where are they? It seems so many are happy to go along with the hollowness of these buzz words when challenging them might mean stepping out of a comfort zone. For me, this buzz propels me out of mine already. I would like the comfort of the comfort zone, but since becoming aware of my own skin this is a luxury I cannot have anymore. And I wish so much my white friends would follow me so I would be less alone on the outside of comfort..

I wish. I wish. I wish that it were someone else. Maybe you? Or you? One of you who is excited and captivated by your queer feminist community. One of you who can choose

when this is an issue for you and when it is not. One of you cloaked in white who are not reminded of how you exist on the outside. One of you who can still see the good rather than the disappointment that is all I see, all I feel. Because I'm not sure any of you are listening, are you? Be honest with me now. Are you listening? Did the words make an impact, pierce your cloak, your skin. Make you see that your fight is not worth a thing at all unless you're ready to unpick the invisible prejudice it's built on. Perhaps you're not ready. Perhaps you'll never be ready. I wish I could undo my being ready. But you see, for me, it wasn't a choice.

Raising the shortcomings of events is not an easy ride, for the dealer or the receiver, but there has to be a way to appraise and support that does not gloss over omissions, errors and exclusions else I have no idea how any of this is going to change. I hate being the critical one. But that doesn't mean I don't see the good, doesn't mean I don't appreciate the tireless hours of work, love and energy that go into making grassroots events happen. But if we cannot critique our communities, and if we cannot take critique of our communities, we are at risk of a gross arrogance that denies the invisible biases in what we are creating. And we will continue to repeat and recreate these biases.

The feminist activist Audre Lorde once wrote: 'Women of today are still being called upon to stretch across the gap of male ignorance and to educate men as to our existence and our needs. This is an old and primary tool of all oppressors to keep the oppressed occupied with the master's concerns. Now we hear that it is the task of women of Color to educate white women -- in the face of tremendous resistance -- as to our existence, our differences, our relative roles in our joint survival. This is a diversion of energies and a tragic repetition of racist patriarchal thought.' She wrote this a couple of decades ago.

I'll share a secret. But it's not really a secret. People of colour have been sharing it for decades, but white people keep the words close to them (like a secret). Because their world will crumble if it gets passed on. Their pedestal, the ground they stand on, it'll all fall away if they start telling. It's not a secret y'know, the words are this: recreating structures of power where a minority group is at the top does not achieve anything. It just does what it says. It recreates. A feminist activism that does not address race does not address anything at all, it just gives white feminists a chance to feel some power. Does it feel good, that power? Is it intoxicating? Do you know where you took that power from? Not from patriarchy. You can pretend to yourself that's where you took it from, but you didn't. White, hetero,

imperialist patriarchy is laughing at you. Because you took it from me.

Having to be the only person who would critique and raise issues of white-centrality at an event broke my heart. Because it made me seriously doubt what hope there is for feminist community when it is not willing to critique privilege, when to me feminism is clearly built on critiquing privilege. It strikes me how unwelcome my words on whiteness were at this meeting, part of an event where my workshop on race had been invited by organisers. What this says to me is this: race activist know your place. 'Speak only when spoken to.'

And I remember sitting in that meeting. The obligatory discussion on how to take things forward, a patting on the back for all that had been achieved. So I sat there. In a room of people who knew how normalised the whiteness of the festival was. Who had happily discussed the problems with me previously. Who agreed with me that it needed raising. I had to sit in that meeting. The only brown face in the room. And I had to raise it. Because no one else was going to do it.

It broke my heart to be in a room full of feminists who have read a wealth of work by feminists of colour, who have themselves inspired me through personal chats to work on things like this zine, who have gotten so much out of race workshops I have run. But these (white) feminists on that day were silent and try as I might I cannot feel okay about that and I cannot get over that. These are people I love, who inspire me. But where were their voices? My critique was met by a mass of explanations, excuses and statements that deflected and undermined the critique through appraisal of the rest of the festival. Which, might I add, I was not trying to discredit.

Hands shaking. Heart pounding. Stomach churning. Is that how feminist empowerment feels? Like shattering? Would anyone else in that room have cared, have noticed, been broken, had it not been raised? And then come the apologies. Aimed at me. The brown one. The one who can purge all your sins if I'll only alleviate your guilt. These voices are many. They stand together and they stand loud. They are a cacophony in my brain. They rattle and hurtle and trample on my will. They generate a guilt in me for feeling anything at all. I want to take it all back, for my voice is one.. Someone please back me up here. Please?

In this, my brown voice stood alone, I exist as weak, marginal and unimportant. My voice is not mussed, my history not valid, and I just want to believe that some white voices will have the guts to stand with me before I give in and sit down.

AN OPEN LETTER TO THE PERSON WHO MADE THIS BANNER



“White people externalize race. For most whites, most of the time, to think or speak about race is to think or speak about people of colour [...] White consciousness of Whiteness is predominantly unconsciousness of whiteness. We perceive and interact with other whites as individuals who have no significant racial characteristics [...] Whiteness attains opacity [...]”
Iyiola Solanke, Mythen Subjekte Masken Kritische Weisseinsforschung in Deutschland

“You can only be destroyed by believing that you really are what the white world calls a nigger.”

I tell you this because I love you and please don't you ever forget it.”
James Baldwin, The Fire Next Time

This banner is just unacceptable and disgustingly racist. You know, this is so far away from being radical and cool. This is just so old and boring. It is something we "common queer nigger bitch-es" grew up into. It takes most of our whole lifetime to decolonize our bodies, minds and souls from this shit and there are some white queer activists, white-not-borders-activists and white-so-and-so that believe it is so cool to bring these words together and reclaim them. Maybe when these people decided to make this banner they didn't realize that their fathers and grandfathers had coined these terms for people like me, for my people, for my ancestors who were made slaves, were colonized, were robbed of everything even their soul. These white people didn't realize that their whiteness is not neutral and neither are the places they inhabit. It is just their skin privilege, their white arrogance and racist assumption that let them believe they could do this shit banner and it would be just fine. Finally, words are not neutral. We have to use them in a way we can change the way we look at these terms not in such a stupid tokenist way. We have to analyse our position and change our look on these terms if we want to use them to reclaim something. As a black, mixed race person who was called "nigger" by a very early age, beat up

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for it, spat on for it i know some words can't be reclaimed, simply because the story some words carry are too heavy, too full of meaning.

“To name certain words is also about to remember the pain it causes. In the act of remembering we are called to relieve, to know again much that we would suppress and forget.”
bell hooks, Sisters of the Yam - Black Women and Self-Recovery

I don't want to reclaim such words. Why should a white person do it for me?! Just think about your shit. Try to be realistic, to ask and try to be really an antiracist ally, friend or whatever, if you really think racism is wrong. Don't assume that just because you believe racism is wrong you are not racist. If you really want to change the racist structure start to document yourself, this will make you understand what can be reclaimed and what cannot. You as a white guy are not in the position to claim such words which have been used against black women for centuries. Mostly try to change the way you look at us, try to build an opposite look. Ask to your black, brown, mixed raced friend before to do such shit. Or you'd better do something else. Really. It takes so much energy, so much anger and sadness to have to deal with such a grossly racist and sexist slogan. But I have to do it. I can't see such an image and go straight by my way. I simply can't as a Black person, it is my responsibility just where you lack of it. You should take on your responsibility as a white person living in a white supremacy western country.

“White is transparent. That is the point of being the dominant race. Sure the whiteness is there, but you never think of it. If you're white you never have to think to it[...] If white folks remind each other about being white, too often the reminder is about threats by outsiders - non whites - who steal white entitlements like good jobs, nice neighbours and the good life [...]I realize its tough having to be responsible about your whiteness. But Blacks and Indians and Asians have to handle their own racial and ethnic selves with some level of awarness, white are not used to, even when they are celebrating who they are [...]”

Iyiola Solanke, Mythen Subjekte Masken Kritische Weisseinsforschung in Deutschland

Do your thing right or don't do it at all. This is such a systematic play and i wish white people would understand it without every person of colour having to point it out. But I suppose white people are so used to abuse their own position and privilege that they don't even notice how often they do that. White people are so used to being in a position of power in front of us, to boss us around that you don't even realize where to draw the line between acceptable and unacceptable. All this story just shows how we are so irrelevant as black women in your eyes, as you feel so legitimate in taking, breaking, joking, fucking our bodies as you like. Right?!

“You know W.E.B.Du Bois said ' To be poor is a hardship, but to be poor in the land of dollars is the bottom of hardship', and to be poor and black and female in America is about the bottom of all that because we are so irrelevant, that's why we can be raped. What difference does it make? It's only some Black Woman.”

Elaine Brown, Former Chairperson Black Panther Party, NO! The Rape Documentary

To those white people who are reading this, next time you are in company of a person of colour and ask how to be a better ally, friend, lover, just stop asking, just do something.

Take responsibility for your actions, be real, don't play. Do something when you see such a shit!

The banner above could have been written by a white queer activist (as it was) or by a fascist militant or nazi; to me it doesn't change the meaning and the offensive and caricatural characters the slogan brings on.

“And so tonight I want to know what roles are being acted? Distorted? What Black-racialized one-dimensional masks are being passed around like some exciting temporary identity? As a joke? As legitimacy? As activism itself? With a head full of swirling sickness and internal inquiries. I sit back and continue to witness the manipulative exchanges and speech that just beckon me to leave...”

Bianca Ortiz, Editor of the zine "Mala"

Also, what's about that drawing?! What should or could it reclaim?! Blackness?! What's beauty?! The person who drew that, doesn't love black people. This is for sure. Everytime we draw lines like that for lips, eyes, noses that erase our features, it is a mimicry of what we really are. The image reminded me of the slavery images made of slaves. The image reminds me the minstrel and at last, the racist drawing made in my elementary classroom which made fun of me, the only blackchild in the entire class, let me know how ugly I am. Black little girls, Black girls and Black women are constantly bombarded by pathologized, racialized, hypersexualized bodies of colors that show us as animalistic, insatiable, neathen and uncontrollable . Antropologists of race, media and historians have defined us as defectives, so I'm not willing to let white people call me "common nigger bitch", i'm exhausted of this imagery and I struggle each day to affirm I'm worthy, that i'm something else than what I was insulted and called by statistics, media, historians and now some arrogant cool white racist.

“I think white people are carefully taught not to recognize white privilege [...] I have come to see white privilege as an invisible package of unearned assets [...] White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports,codebooks, visas, clothes, tools and blank checks.”

Aretha Schwarzbach-Apithy, Mythen Subjekte Masken Kritische Weisseinforschung in Deutschland

“Being a woman is learning from a young age what you can get in return for sex. So, my mother fed me on what she could make work and what I didn't get from my parents, I received in exchange for my body, for all I was worth. And it isn't worth too much in this society, Blackness in the female form. Especially when you have to eat and have no skills, or are underage. Blame it on history.”

Wendy Thompson, Without a Net - Growing Up Working Class

The map of black women's bodies has been distorted and dehumanized so many times I don't think it is appropriate to play with that, especially in such a dominant white contest.What is that, a new queer trend? A new appropriation of colored bodies? A new way to control us? To silence us? If it is your queer activism, it is shit to me. We can claim and define ourselves in our way. I am exhausted of your playing on our backs, at our expenses, cool radical white queers. Before claiming to be radical, claim to be an anti racist activist, a no border activist DO a serious work about the position you inhabit in this world, about your privilege and how you oppress because of it. Sometimes just shut up!

Thanks to:

Jin and Humey for the Support and Love. For your brilliant work which inspires me and keeps me going.

This is dedicated to:

To All Queer People of Colours out there, cuz we are beautiful and we are worth. whatever white people do or think. They still have to surprise us, right?! When they will do it, maybe they could really be our allies and friends and lovers without the need to exotize,to degrade, to tokenize us. Especially to my soul-sisters who showed me the way, who gave me refugee and make home for me: Aishah Shahidah Simmons, Carole Crawford, Ayanna Serwa, Kagendo Murungi. I love you.

alien surplus

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I don't want to present the laceration in my skin to the stinging breath of the person who has unexpectedly, and of the jealousy that only comes with ownership, sunk a blade into my skin and dragged it along my flesh, me feeling the rupture, the give, the cold metal, the shock, blood searing, intrusion, violation, nauseous outrage, them a hasty protective release to hasten the next moment of their day. They may NOT examine it for me.

They are ashamed , because they know that they are held back from that part of me by a force stronger than gravity, that something has been detected in them that they cannot retroactively reframe. I turn to my friends with different but similar wounds and scars.

I'm going to state this quickly in negative terms. I'm not interested in propagating the accurate observation that we are all perpetrating harms along the lines of bigotry as well as experiencing them. That there needed to be an us/them dichotomy, binary. That we're all a little bit ---ist, a little bit ---- phobic. I don't particularly want to enact that speech in London again.

Power, dispersed, onto our bodies, rupturing love.

I don't want to, I also, really don't want to address the problematic of communication, of education, of educating people against their bigotry. It feels colonial, it feels missionary to me. A terrible sinking rage as my voice is ripped out of its stomach and its dignity, like when eyes glaze over with the entrapment of cowardly self-love, the steel in the eyes of a person who is terrified of the new realm of trial/error accountability, discovery, trisk, hat follows the acknowledgement of their inadvertant harm.

Today, I don't think I have much more to say than that I can't brave my body to do more than turn to the people I can turn to respectfully, lovingly. And maybe it's okay for there to be shadows in the doorway, figures in odd corners, gazes alighting from across a room, ears straining to know.

An outsider in every city and country on whose ground I've ever found myself, I joke with a new friend about how we both find ourselves to be social aliens. Fascinated by the little things people do with each other, strangers especially and friends especially, when lovingly connecting.

To the extent that our bodies are constantly stolen from us, really violated, systematically, I think very many of us are aliens who enjoy the steady work-play of being studiously known through whatever senses, and knowing.

THIS IS NOT A TRIBUTE TO AUDRE LORDE:

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In March, I was invited to speak at the “tribute panel” dedicated to Black feminist thought, especially the work and life of Audre Lorde during the National Women’s Studies Association. I felt honored, and more than slightly intimidated, to be selected to address the importance of Audre Lorde’s work in my own life as well as in the feminist movement at large. Other panelists were Kaila Adia Story (University of Louisville) and Melinda L. de Jesus (California College of the Arts).

It was during my second year of college I was first introduced to the writings of Audre in a Women’s Studies course.

Throughout the academic term, students read several articles each week, discussed them in the class, and wrote journal entries that reflect on the week’s readings. Week after week, most of the assigned materials were those written by white, middle-class, straight (or sometimes “political lesbian”) women, and I was having difficulty relating to much of what was being discussed. I kept writing in my journal how I didn’t relate to the reading, but I did not realize it had anything to do with the selection of the materials. I felt bad about being so “negative” about feminism and feminists.

Toward the end of the term, one week was dedicated to the work of “women of color” (yes, a whole week—woo hoo!). If I remember correctly, it consisted of selections

from the anthology “This Bridge Called My Back” (Combahee River Collective statement, and I think one of the Cherrie Moraga’s pieces) and Audre Lorde’s “Sister Outsider.” For the first time, these articles spoke to me. They gave voice to my feelings of alienation and frustration that I could not point a finger on. And even though it was just a week out of the entire term, and it is possibly the worst form of tokenism within the discipline, they anchored me to feminism and Women’s Studies to this date. Without “Sister Outsider,” I may not have been a feminist today.

But one week was not enough for me to gain the confidence and strength it took to speak out when I find myself surrounded by white middle-class feminists who seemed oblivious to the emotional pain and sadness their racist or classist statements and actions caused. It was not enough to just read things written by Audre and others like her; I needed to actually construct a support system around me, people of all races and genders who are passionately committed to justice in all aspects of society and to empathically holding each other accountable.

In summer of 2000, I moved to Portland, Oregon—the first large city I lived as an adult. On my second day in Portland, I met Diana Courvant, a white transsexual woman who founded Survivor Project to address the needs of trans and intersex survivors of domestic and sexual violence. Also a survivor with a complex history around gender and sexual identities, I immediately became involved with Survivor Project. It also helped that Diana was a veteran of multi-issue social justice organizing, and I learned a lot from her.

But as I got to know Diana, I also learned that not all feminists embraced trans people. In fact, she was at the time trapped in the middle of the worst nightmare of controversy within Portland’s lesbian/feminist community, which she later wrote about (see “Speaking of Privilege” in “This Bridge We Call Home,” edited by Gloria Anzaldua and AnaLouise Keating). To put it short: Diana was invited to a women’s retreat in the Oregon forest, which after she accepted the invitation instituted a “no penis” policy banning transsexual women who had not have sex reassignment surgery from attending. She declined to participate, but held a workshop on trans issues outside with the help of non-trans allies. The workshop was successful, but a rumor was spread shortly thereafter alleging that she trespassed on the women-only retreat and exposed herself. It was obviously false, but extremely hurtful.

It was in response to this climate I wrote the piece “The Transfeminist Manifesto,” which was later published in the anthology “Catching a Wave: Reclaiming Feminism for the 21st Century” edited by Rory Dicker and Alison Piepmier. The manifesto addressed various feminist concerns, such as reproductive choice and health and violence against women, and discussed how transsexual women share many of the concerns of other women. I wanted to write a feminist theory that counter the argument that transsexual women were so different from all other women that there is no place for transsexual women within feminism (or that feminism has no use for transsexual women). I wanted to provide easy-to-repeat arguments that pro-trans feminists can use to confront blatant bigotry and falsehoods against

RACIST FEMINISM AT NWSA 2008

transsexual women. And to these ends, I think "Manifesto" was successful.

But there was something unsettling about the "Manifesto." In an effort to forge an alliance between transsexual and non-transsexual women, the piece neglected the struggles of transsexual men and other transgender or genderqueer people who do not identify as "women" unless it was convenient to include them. The piece was also weak on intersectional analysis—that is, how anti-trans sentiments and oppressions compound and complicate oppressions other than sexism, including and especially racism and classism. It borrowed from the work of women of color when it was useful—for example, to point out that transsexual women's unique experiences should not be the basis for their exclusion because to do so would presuppose a singular universal female experience, which is obviously false—without contributing any insights as to how the inclusion of trans sensibility helps to fight racism and other oppressions.

The fact is, I had only been living in my new home town for three months or so when I wrote this piece, and I was not fully in touch with my own discomfort with the white feminism that filled nine out of ten weeks of the Introduction to Women's Studies, nor did I feel confident enough to challenge the view that feminism is simply about advocating for women and fighting sexism—and nothing more. In short, what I had written was a version of white feminism that was modified just enough to include transsexual women. At the time, I felt that it was the only safe way to write a feminist theory that advanced transsexual women's place within feminism. I spent next couple of years meeting more

people with a common commitment for justice for all, slowly building the self-confidence it takes to "transform silence into language and action," as Audre famously stated. What I will discuss below is one such silence that was turned into language and action.

The invitation to speak at the panel honoring the legacy of Audre Lorde stated: "NWSA would be pleased to offer you complimentary conference registration as a way of thanking you for your time and expertise. Regrettably, however, NWSA has a limited budget and cannot cover your travel expenses." But I am not a career academic, and without regular employment I cannot afford to spend hundreds of dollars just to speak at an academic conference. I wrote back explaining my situation and asking for financial assistance to attend the conference, to which the executive director of NWSA repeated, "NWSA would be able to offer complimentary membership and registration; I certainly wish we could do more." I began talking to some members of Governing Council (board of directors of NWSA) I happen to know, and asked them to advocate on my behalf; they emailed the director, but the response was the same. I also learned that another long-time queer social justice activist I respect was invited by NWSA last year, but she had to turn down the invitation due to the organization's unwillingness to cover her travel expense. I could decline the invitation too, but then NWSA could go on every year attempting to exploit activists while pretending to honor and support their work without anyone challenging them on it, so I decided to do something different: I wrote to WMST-L, an international Women's Studies email list with thousands of

subscribers, explaining the circumstance and asking people to write to the NWSA to protest its practice, and to donate some money for me to attend the conference.

Within days, I received a dozen or so offers of contributions, and just as many apparently wrote to the executive director of NWSA, including members of Governing Council. Lesbian Caucus chair Lisa Burke, Women of Color Caucus co-chair Pat Washington, and Bisexual/Transgender Interest Group rep Joelle Ruby Ryan were among the most supportive. But that was when things began turning bizarre. The executive director apparently told some of my supporters that I was already being provided a hotel room on NWSA's money, implicitly suggesting that I was being dishonest or possibly running a scheme to defraud well-intentioned feminist scholars. Thinking that the director perhaps changed her mind and decided to fund at least some of my expenses, I contacted NWSA again—only to be told that nothing had changed and I was still on my own (albeit with the help of many supporters).

I received enough donations to cover most of my expenses, so I flew to Cincinnati to take part in the tribute panel. In my speech, I talked about how I discovered the work of Audre Lorde, how important it was, and yet how reading her books was not enough to genuinely feel empowered. I read from a postscript I wrote for "The Transfeminist Manifesto" and how that piece reflects a period in my life in which I was cautiously negotiating my place within feminism. Then I spoke about the panel itself, and how I seriously struggled whether or not I should participate in this celebration of

Audre Lorde and her work, when the very structure of the forum betrayed her legacy. I have to wonder, I said, if Audre were still around, she would accept the invitation to speak at this conference under such humiliating circumstances. Audre does not deserve this. And this "tribute panel" was not the proper way to honor and memorialize Audre's contribution to Women's Studies. And part of the reason I felt ambivalent about speaking on this panel was due to the fear that my presence at the conference might help legitimatize what is fundamentally illegitimate.

Audre herself faced similar circumstance in 1979, when she was invited to speak in the "only panel at [Second Sex Conference, held at New York University] where the input of Black feminists and lesbians is represented," despite the fact that she accepted the invitation "with the understanding that [Lorde] would be commenting upon papers dealing with the role of difference within the lives of american women," which would not be possible "without a significant input from poor women, Black and Third World women, and lesbians." Her talk, titled "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," which is included in "Sister Outsider," is not nearly as well understood as the title is known.

When Audre said "master's tools," what she was referring to was white, middle-class, straight feminists' unwillingness to recognize the differences among women along the lines of race, class, sexuality, etc. By failing to seize the strength that could come from the acknowledgement of differences, not just between white and Black women, but also among

Black women—why did the organizers fail to involve more Black women, as if expecting Audre to represent all Black women?—she alleges that many white feminists are complicit in maintaining the racist, homophobic patriarchy.

In a different text, also part of "Sister Outsider," Audre once declared that she would never talk to white women about racism again. Obviously that was not the last time she did, but I have no doubt that she frequently struggled with the urge to give up. Part of the reason I decided finally to attend the conference and to speak at the tribute was the recognition that I stand on the shoulders of Audre Lorde and her contemporaries, many of whom are still alive but many are gone. The panel was successful, and the discussion involving three panelists and the audience lasted almost three hours even though it was originally scheduled for only 75 minutes.

During the delegate assembly on the next day, Lisa Burke from the lesbian caucus spoke out. The executive director had promised her that she would "take care of" my situation, which was understood to mean that NWSA would at the least provide my housing for the conference, and yet somehow it did not happen. The director responded that NWSA did in fact booked a room for me and paid for it out of its account, and blamed her assistant, a Black woman who was not present in the room, for the "miscommunication." Lisa protested this act of scapegoating and called for the organization to reimburse me for the lodging expense and to issue an official apology. Every delegate voted in favor of the motion. The

resolution almost made me feel guilty, partly because another woman of color is pitted against me and blamed for the whole ordeal, and partly because the thought of a \$170/night room sitting empty for me is too wasteful for me to think about.

I called the hotel next morning to find out how much NWSA had paid for the room that I did not know was reserved for me, but the clerk informed me that there was no record of reservation for any nights this past week. There is still a remote possibility that NWSA made a reservation at another hotel nearby because the conference hotel was sold out. But that seems unlikely, especially since the organization had no idea which date I was planning to come to Cincinnati or to go home. It is too depressing to think that the executive director of a national feminist, scholarly institution would engage in such pattern of dishonesty and racism in the process of organizing and hosting a tribute to the legacy of Audre Lorde.

In a sense, the tribute panel turned out to be the perfect commemoration of Audre's legacy. It exposed the ugly reality of what Audre calls "racist feminism," which was lurking behind the superficial public rhetoric of anti-racism. It brought up intense emotions, including anger, and we sought to channel them for constructive uses. We paid tribute to Audre the best way we could, which was not by reading some academic papers about her, but by being passionately engaged in the struggle against the oppression of all people. I hope that I did my part to make her proud.

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Did Anyone Say I Am A Racist?

A: You grew up a second/third generation Arab Jew in Israel, and migrated to Germany as a young person. What made you choose Germany - you wouldn't think it's the best place to be Jewish and Arab? :)

L: Well, here I could go for the usual reasons - I wanted to take T and it's easier in Germany, life is easier in Europe. Although not for immigrants, but you don't know that before you move, somehow you think they are waiting for you with an "easy-moving-in package". :)

But there was something else, maybe deeper, that was attracting me to Germany. First, as a Jew in Israel, you get the Holocaust issue chewed in your ears from Kindergarten until you are old: 'One-two-three - cry now, 6,000,000 Jews - orrrrry. Ok, now it's over, don't think about it till next week/year.' My father taught me to bite on my lip whenever the 2-minute siren was played.

As an Arab Jew, the Holocaust had nothing to do with my family. The stories I heard were about their lives in Morocco/Iraq, and were not always negative. They were about moving to Israel and living in bad conditions for a long time, while in the next neighbourhood European Jews had their own houses. I am sure it was not that black and white. But listening to my father's stories about his childhood, I always got this image of giant villas with beautiful white kids who will grow up to be doctors, and on the other side my father and his friends playing in the dirt.

So this "German issue", or "the Germans", had two sides to it:

As the Nazis who did something to us (which is actually them); or as the ones who come out better in my father's stories. He would show off with his European friends, would pronounce their German last names trying to cut every consonant deep.

As a rebellion towards my "national" history; or as a move to the light. We actually have a word for an Arab Jew who's trying to pass as a European: Mitashknez.

A: People in queer scenes often think that racism and Anti-Semitism aren't an issue for them, or that they are automatically on the 'right side'. I know you have a lot of views and stories about this, can you share some of them here?

L: Well, I have met two types of people:

Those who think that gender politics are the only politics and those who consider themselves left-wing and then claim that because the system was telling them x is bad, they think x is good (as a rebellion).

The first type would meet in events that are more white European and privileged than any extreme right-wing gathering. ;) But they see themselves as so diverse and colourful and interesting and open to everyone..

"Unfortunately, there are no queer immigrants here, I mean, I do not know any immigrants personally..."

..because there are so many gender expressions represented there:

German dykes putting on moustaches and making fun of men, or German dykes (who will then join the next everyone-is-becoming-tranny round, and then say they are hetero men and have nothing to do with queer, and that they think the left-wing people are too radical with their opinions about the police, and what's the problem with the police anyway) who put on a moustache and feel like they are the hottest ones on earth and like to celebrate their discovery with the crowd.

The second type will hang around in leftist spaces, consider themselves radical, but part of this radicalism will be blaming those dark hairy ones.

'Don't say "Ausländer" [foreigners, a category long used for migrants and people of colour, even from the second or third generation of migration]. Say "Migranten" [a category similar to political blackness invented by migrants and people of colour but now politely mainstreamed], or better even: "My friends of Turkish/Arab/whatever background."

.. for making their streets unsafe and bringing their bad sexist traditions.

Hey hey hey, did anyone say I am a racist? No way, you know, I am really against the Holocaust, and I want to go to Iiizrail, it's just those Arab men, you understand, right? Hey, why are you so upset? You know, as a woman, I just want to feel free when I walk down the street, and I am proud to be in Germany as it's so good to gays. So I think my country should stay that way, like, Ausländer like you are good, but not those hairy, ehhm, ehhm, sexist ones who beat their wives and look like monkeys. Why are you running away? Hey, you should know it as well, you had Arabs in your country, look what they do to you, poor Jews....

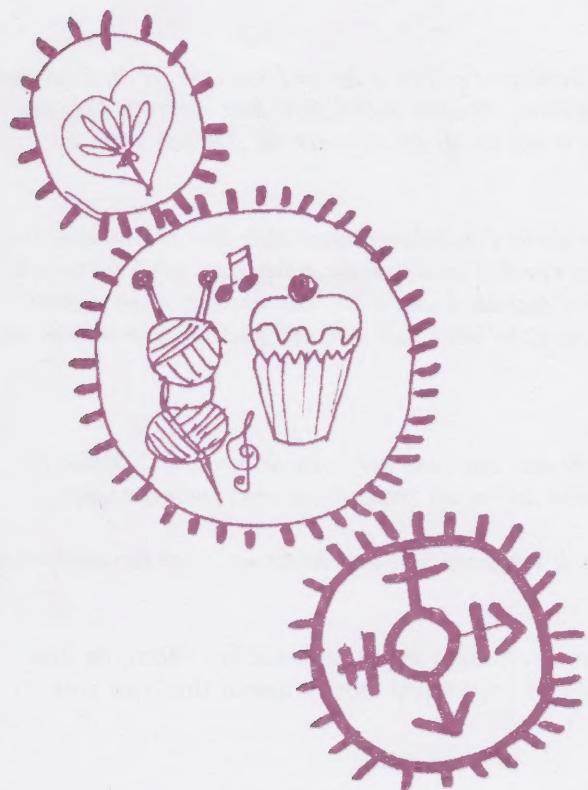
(to be continued)

Princess Leia interviewed by Miss Ana Bolica

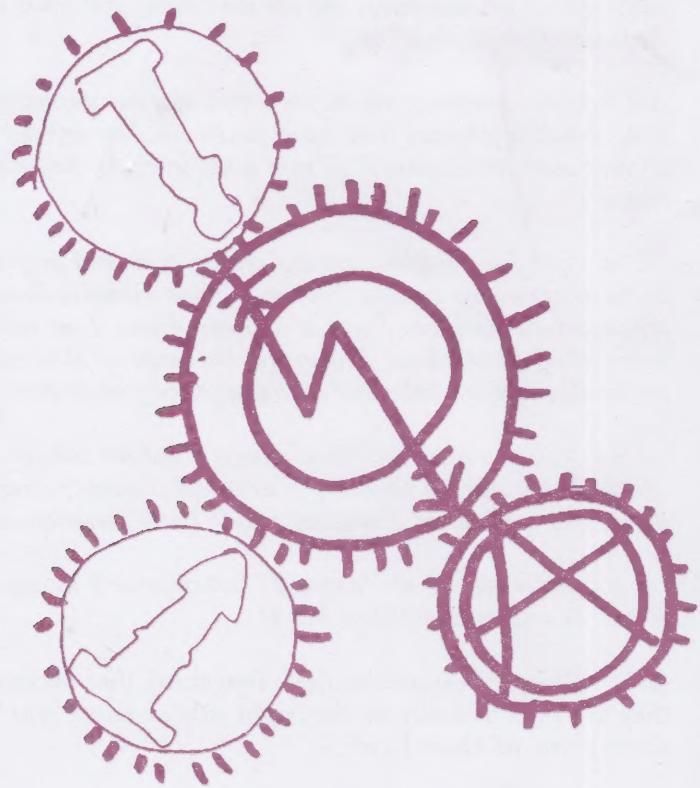
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recognition

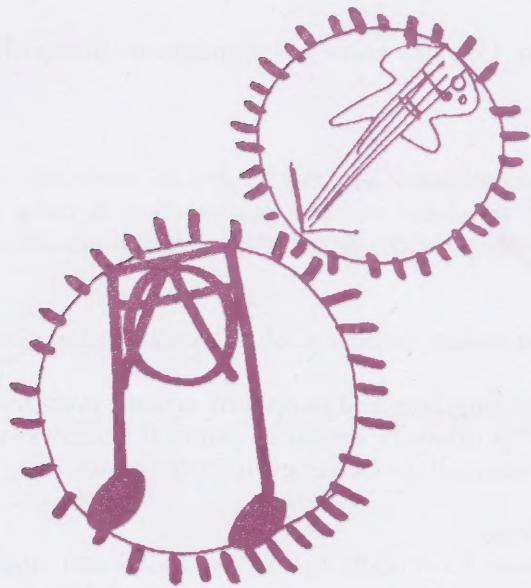
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LADYFEST



QUEERUPTION



MOST D.I.Y. GIGS I GO TO



ANTI-WAR, ANTI-G8 ETC
ACTIONS AND PLANNING THEREOF



NOTE:- GLARING OMISSION: TAKING DIS/ABILITY INTO CONSIDERATION. ALL TOO OFTEN AN AFTERTHOUGHT, THAT IS IF IT IS THOUGHT ABOUT AT ALL (HP)

